40th Anniversary • Issue 511

Guitarist

JUNE 2024

70 Years Of The Strat

Guest Edited By **Hank Marvin**

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70TH ANNIVERSARY STRAT REVIEW

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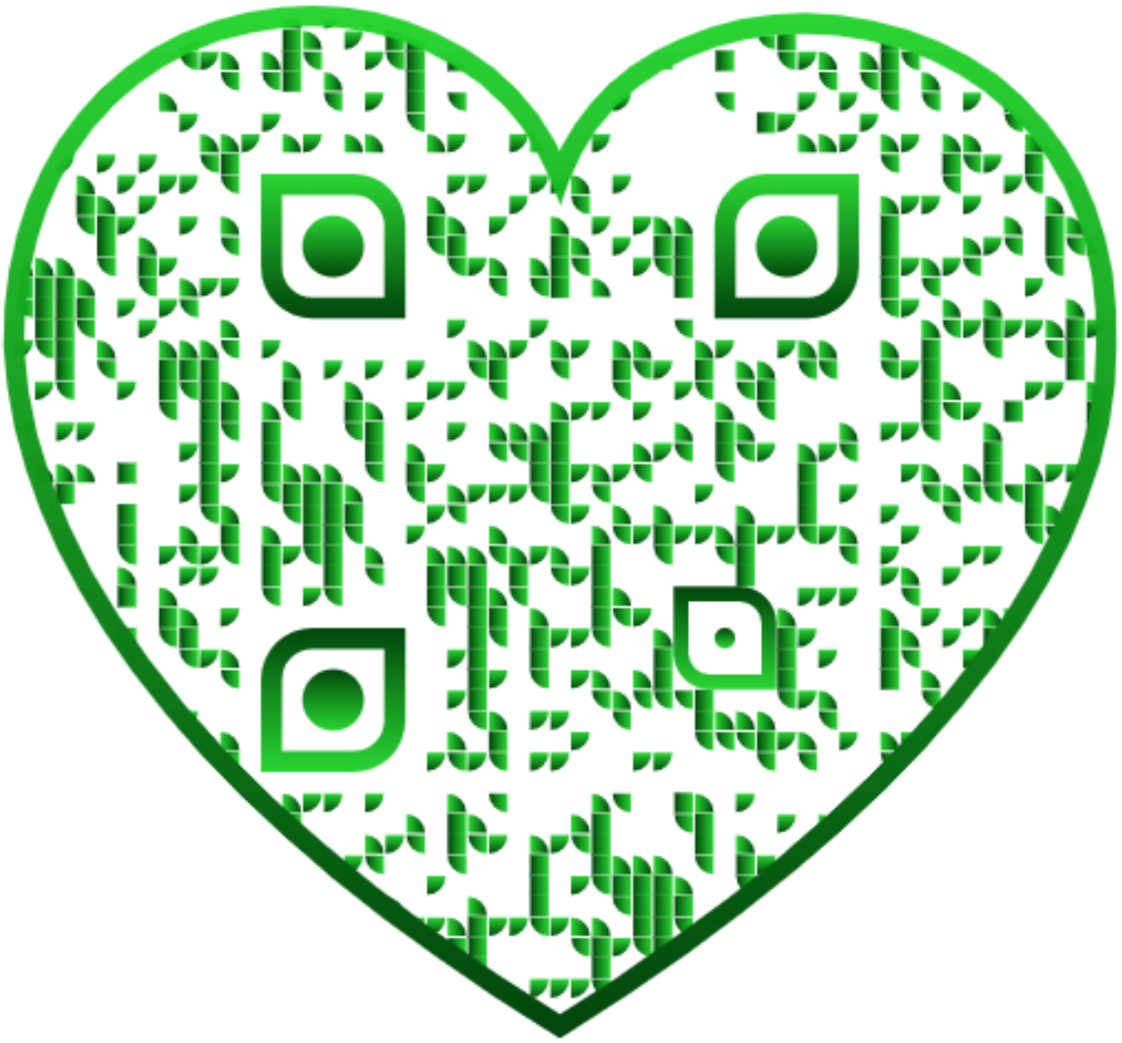

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70 Years Young...

Hello *Guitarist* readers. I was honoured to be asked to contribute to this edition, celebrating the magazine's 40th anniversary and the 70th birthday of the Fender Stratocaster. For my 'editorial', I thought I'd share a few thoughts about Strats and other guitars I've used over the years.

Leo Fender got it so right with the Strat. The contoured body is so comfortable, and one volume knob controls the three pickups so there are no level discrepancies when switching between pickups. The double-cutaway gives superb access, and the three pickups provide a variety of tones, either singly or in combination. The whammy bar, when set up correctly (as mine are), does not affect the tuning even when violently shaken (but never stirred). Also, the bar could swivel across the strings, unlike a Bigsby, allowing it to be held in the picking hand so you could use it and pick at the same time. And it's such a cool-looking guitar!

When the Fender Custom Shop made my Signature Strats, they copied the body of my 1958 model, and it was observed that the contours were much more flowing and, to quote, "sexier" than the later models. Had I been there when the guitar was designed, I might have gone for a slightly wider fingerboard so that the first string is not pulled off the edge so easily. A five-way pickup switch would have made it easier to access the possible combinations, and locking machineheads would have helped with changing strings and better tuning. Also, the Easy-Mute vibrato bar that I use (designed by Ian St John-White and made with surgical steel, as is the block that is drilled and threaded specifically for the bar that fits it), never gets loose as the originals do.

It hasn't only been Strats, though. In 1961 bought a Gretsch Country Gentleman, dreaming that it would help me play like Chet Atkins. I failed. I used it on The Shadows' *Nivram*, and Cliff's *A Girl Like You*, but I didn't get on with it and sold it. Towards the end of '63 we changed to the Burns Marvin, which I used until 1969/'70 when mine were stolen. I then bought a black Les Paul Custom, which I found heavy, uncomfortable and I missed the whammy bar. So it was back to the Stratocaster!

I have a number of Strats. A couple of archtops – one made by Stephen Grimes in Hawaii, a work of art, finished in blue with a quilted maple back. I have a couple of Martins, two Taylors, one a beautiful black finish with superb inlays. I played that on *Ticket To Ride* on the *Guitar Player* CD and on *Windmills Of Your Mind*. There are a couple of Matons, and a selection of Gypsy jazz guitars; one is an old Favino, which I used on most of the tracks on *Guitar Player*. And a Danelectro baritone added depth and richness to the intro phrases on *La Bamba* and *Sealed With A Kiss*. But the Strat, for me, is like an old friend. I feel I can get a lot of personality and expression out of my Strat. And I do love that whammy bar!

All the best, Hank

COVER IMAGE BY OLLY CURTIS HANK MARVIN PHOTO BY MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Guitarist

Future Publishing Limited, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA
Telephone 01225 442244 Email guitarist@futurenet.com Online www.guitarist.co.uk

EDITORIAL

Editor-In-Chief
Jamie Dickson
jamie.dickson@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Darren Phillips
darren.phillips@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
David Mead
david.mead@futurenet.com

Reviews Editor
Dave Burrluck
dave@daveburrluck.com

Managing Editor
Lucy Rice
lucy.rice@futurenet.com

Content Director, Music
Scott Rowley
scott.rowley@futurenet.com

Senior Music Editor
Jason Sidwell
jason.sidwell@futurenet.com

Contributors
Gemma Audus, Richard Barrett, Alex Bishop, Trevor Curwen, Andrew Daly, Richard Genet, Nick Guppy, Martin Holmes, Richard Hood, Glenn Kimpton, Neville Marten, Hank Marvin, Matthew Parker, Huw Price, Davina Rungasamy, Gary Stuckey, Stuart Williams, Henry Yates, Charlie Wilkins

In-House Photography
Phil Barker, Olly Curtis, Neil Godwin

ADVERTISING
MEDIA PACKS ARE AVAILABLE ON REQUEST
CHIEF REVENUE DIRECTOR Zack Sullivan zack.sullivan@futurenet.com
UK COMMERCIAL SALES DIRECTOR Clare Dove clare.dove@futurenet.com
ADVERTISING SALES DIRECTOR Lara Jaggon lara.jaggon@futurenet.com

MARKETING
CONSUMER REVENUES DIRECTOR Sharon Todd sharon.todd@futurenet.com

PRINT & PRODUCTION
HEAD OF PRODUCTION UK & US Mark Constance mark.constance@futurenet.com
PRODUCTION MANAGER Frances Twentyman frances.twentyman@futurenet.com
SENIOR AD PRODUCTION MANAGER Jo Crosby jo.crosby@futurenet.com
DIGITAL EDITIONS MANAGER Jason Hudson jason.hudson@futurenet.com
DIGITAL EDITIONS PRODUCER Nick Lee nick.lee@futurenet.com

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING & SYNDICATION
GUITARIST IS AVAILABLE FOR LICENSING AND SYNDICATION. TO FIND OUR MORE CONTACT US AT LICENSING@FUTURENET.COM OR VIEW OUR AVAILABLE CONTENT AT WWW.FUTURECONTENTHUB.COM
HEAD OF PRINT LICENSING Rachel Shaw licensing@futurenet.com

CIRCULATION
HEAD OF FUTURE INTERNATIONAL & BOOKAZINES Tim Mathers
HEAD OF NEWSTRADE Emma Bone

MANAGEMENT
SVP CONSUMER Kevin Addley kevin.addley@futurenet.com
BRAND DIRECTOR Stuart Williams stuart.williams1@futurenet.com
HEAD OF ART & DESIGN Rodney Dive rodney.dive@futurenet.com
HEAD OF DESIGN (MUSIC) Brad Merrett brad.merrett@futurenet.com
GROUP ART DIRECTOR Graham Dalzell graham.dalzell@futurenet.com

CUSTOMER SERVICES & SUBSCRIPTIONS
APP SUPPORT apps@futurenet.com
ONLINE www.magazinesdirect.com EMAIL help@magazinesdirect.com
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Chief Financial and Strategy Officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

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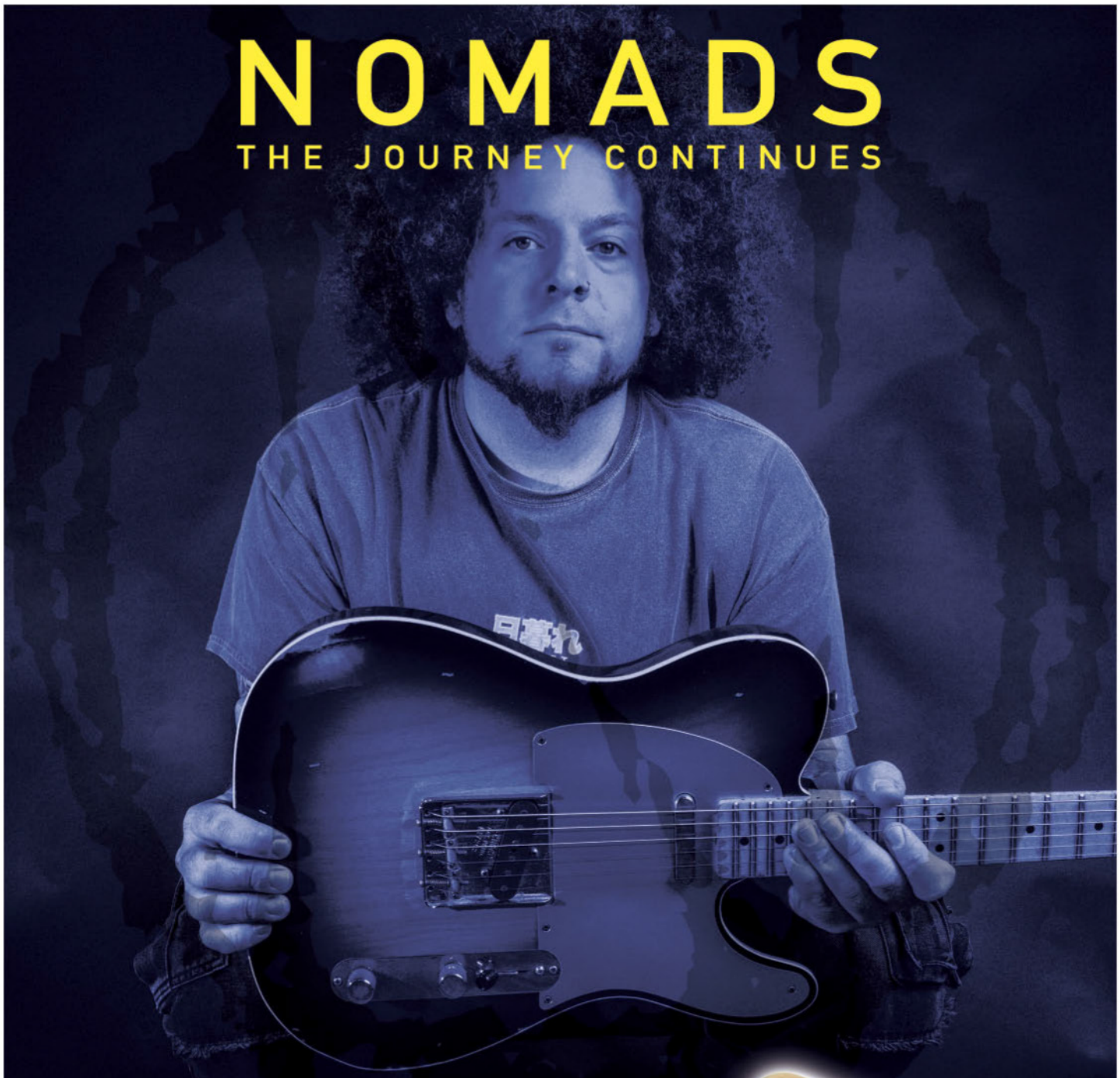
THE JOURNEY CONTINUES



"I've always loved using Telecaster tones on my recordings. Nomads get super heavy without any unwanted spikiness but also respect the early '50s Tele tones for all the lower gain chime and spank that I love."

RABEA MASSAAD

BEA

Rabea Massaad signature Telecaster set

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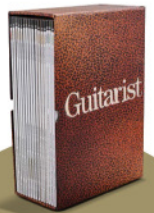

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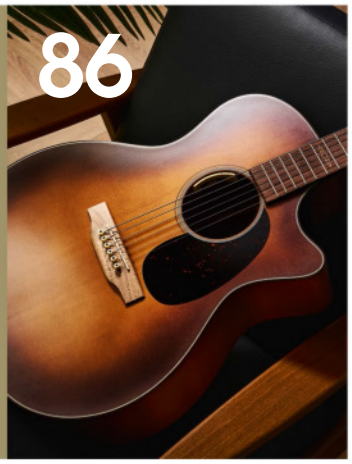
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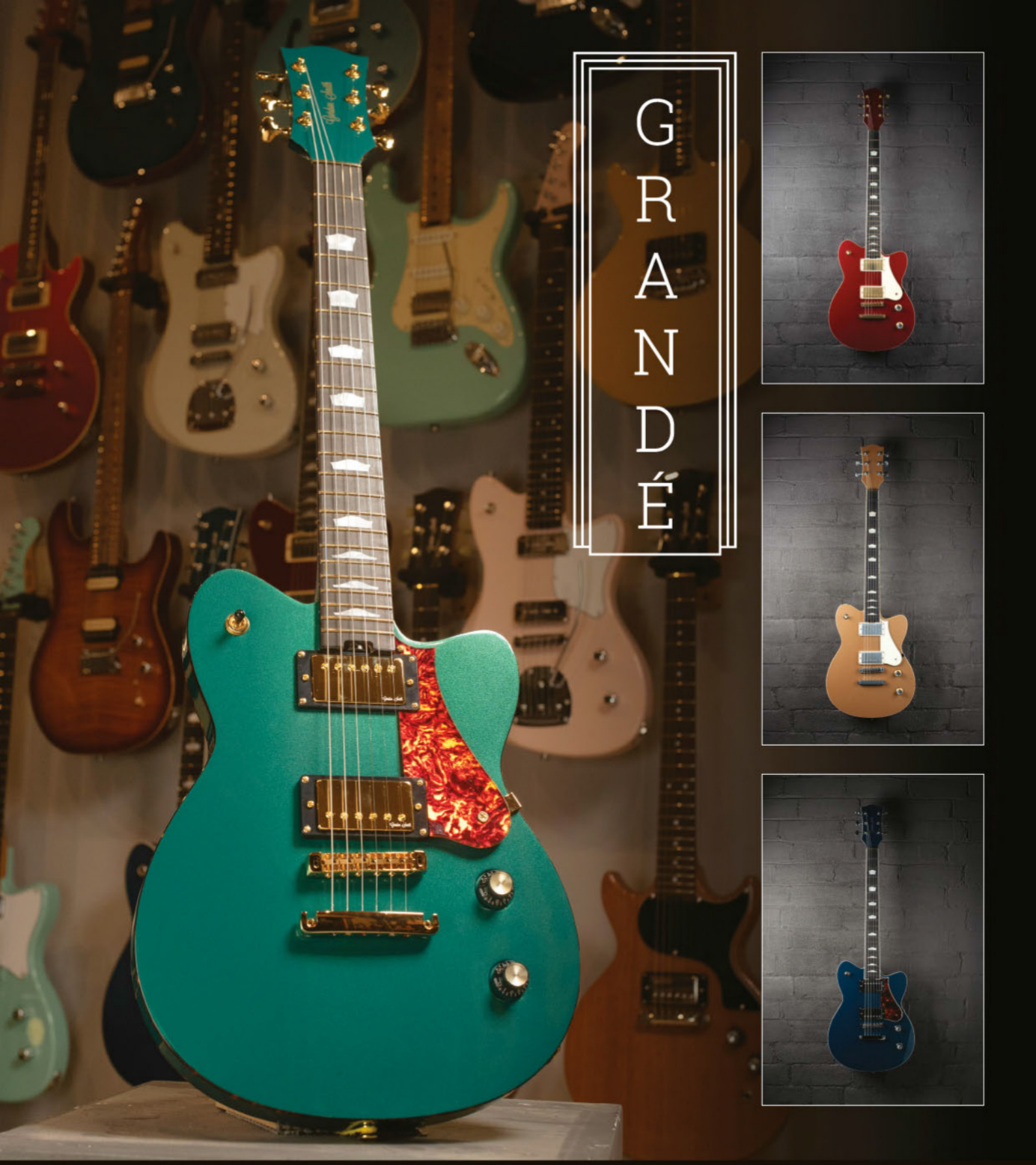

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MANSON GUITAR WORKS VERONA JUNIOR
£1,399

WHAT IS IT? UK-made stripped-back rock machine with addictive sounds from its single humbucker and smart switching

Simple Pleasures

This latest release from Manson Guitar Works comes in two body shapes with uncompromised playability and sound at an aggressive price. Prepare to be impressed!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Olly Curtis

What's this? Is Manson Guitar Works celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Gibson Les Paul Junior? No, clearly not, but that 'Junior' moniker is applied to many single-pickup guitars and that's the proposition here. The new Manson Junior comes in the brand's classic modern T-style MA shape and the new Verona outline we have here, obviously based on the Stratocaster and a request from Manson majority shareholder Matt Bellamy. The Ashburton-based Brit maker, who currently has nine staff and an output between 200 and 300 UK-built guitars annually, took a close look at every manufacturing process to hone it down to the base essentials without compromising quality in the least.

Like many makers, particularly those in the UK, Manson is using lightweight obeche for the Junior's solid bodies – and it's a first for a Manson production guitar. Equally on trend is the satin open-pore finish, which is offered in five colours. We also get top-line Gotoh hardware: the popular all-steel through-string block saddle bridge and those smoothly shaped 510 tuners with height-adjustable posts, which are set with staggered heights here to remove the need for one or two string trees.

1. While many makers favour rounded and contoured body heels, the Junior is old-school: just a very tight-fitting neck, neckplate and four screws

2. There's no confusing what brand you're buying here with Manson's large script logo. There are no string trees, either, as the Gotoh tuners have height-adjustable posts

All the electrics, including the output jack, are mounted on a rugged black-coated aluminium scratchplate, while the impressive Fender-scale, slab-sawn, satin-finished maple neck is screwed to the body on a standard square heel platform. We only get side dots (no face markers) on the unbound rosewood fingerboard, but the fretwork and edge rolling is exceptional, as is the neck shape. It might be a streamlined 'basic' design, not least after Manson only recently unveiled the £14k GEO Mask Edition, but the execution is faultless.

The neck shaping and feel are just as impressive. It's a pretty mainstream width and depth (42.8mm wide at the nut, 20.6mm deep at the 1st fret, 22.5mm by the 12th), but the 'soft V' profile pares away the shoulders on the neck and it actually feels slimmer than it is in reality. There's virtually zero neck flex, too, and a shape this good just disappears, to our hands at least. The medium-size fretwire (measured at 2.65mm wide by 1.2mm high) isn't over-big and has good height, and the setup is spot on, like every other detail of the guitar.

The Dirty Rascal is just as at home with classic rock duties as it is with more progressive and heavily gained styles

Feel & Sounds

We'd argue 'feel and sound' are the essence of this guitar. First off, the body wood choice ensures it's far from overweight at 3.31kg (7.28lb), although you can expect some variance; an MA Junior that we also had for our sound test was super light at just 2.58kg (5.68lb). In combination with the clearly very thin finish, the Verona rings like a bell strummed acoustically, a feature that's always been a part of any Manson electric guitar we've played.

3. These devilishly simple controls – a kill-button and push-push volume/Mojo switch – manage to give the Junior some expansive sounds

UNDER THE HOOD

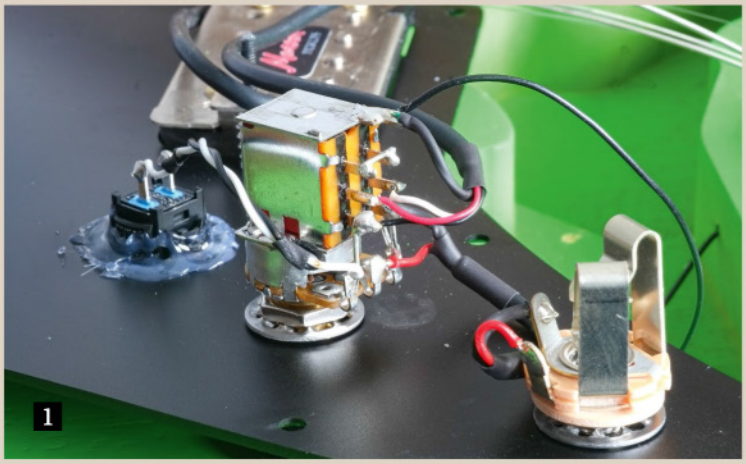
No Sustaniac or fuzz box here!

The very simple circuit has minimal components: an A500kohms push-push volume/Mojo switch, a standard Japanese-made kill-button and a Switchcraft output jack. There's no screening in the cavities, though the aluminium 'plate acts as a shield. And don't forget that both positions of the Mojo switch are humbucking. Without a tone control or treble bleed, there are also no additional capacitors and resistors, either.

Removing the neck allows us to see the clean routed cavities and just how tightly the neck fits. There's barely any finish in the neck pocket and no need for a neck shim.

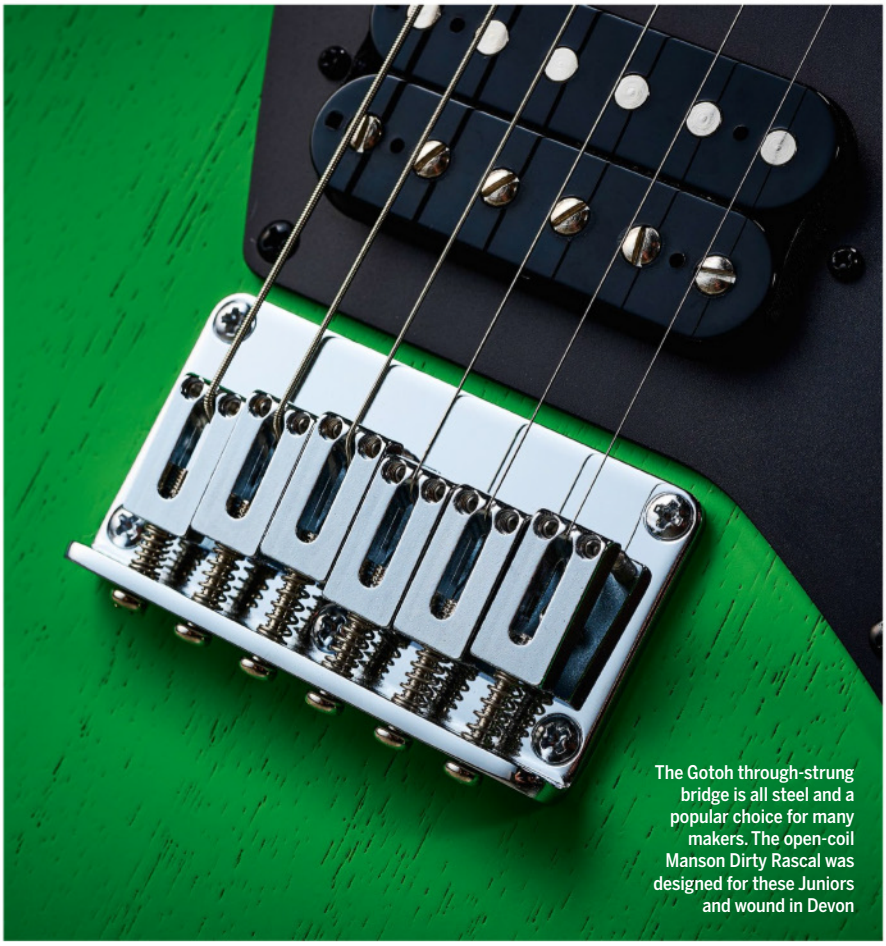
As Manson's Adrian Ashton tells us, the Dirty Rascal humbucker started out as a request from Graham Coxon: "Listening to his sounds, old and new, we thought the PF-1 [Matt Bellamy Signature humbucker] would be a little bit too heavy, a little bit too much gain," he says. "But we also do the Benchmark, a bit more like a slightly hot-rod PAF. So with the Dirty Rascal we were aiming for something between the two – a Benchmark Plus if you like."

Designer Simon Thorn confirms the 'hot take on a PAF' concept: "It's machine-wound and the coils are matched. We use 42 AWG plain enamel, an Alnico V cast magnet and it's vacuum potted." Measured at output, we read the DCR at 9.32kohms (series) and 2.37k (parallel).



1. The minimalist circuit is the key to the Junior's expansive sounds

2. There's no ID on the new Dirty Rascal humbucker, but it's wound in-house in Devon like all of Manson's pickups



The Gotoh through-strung bridge is all steel and a popular choice for many makers. The open-coil Manson Dirty Rascal was designed for these Juniors and wound in Devon

There might just be a single open-coil Manson Dirty Rascal humbucker, but alongside a kill-button for those staccato effects, it's the single volume control that's key here. It's actually a push-push switched pot that Manson calls its Mojo switch, which, when down, links the humbucker's coils in series as normal. Push it up, though, and the coils are wired in parallel, producing a cleaner, lighter and more single-coil sound that is still hum-cancelling.

Warming up our test amps with a 1957 Gibson Les Paul Junior puts us in the mind of that benchmark tone. And with a bit of a 'beat that' challenge, we plugged in the Verona Junior (and then the MA Junior). Yes, they're different, but they really capture the raucous power of the Gibson. It's a little brighter full up with a little less body, but it's a Junior all right: the archetypal snotty-nosed punk (or at least the Dirty Rascal!) of the electric guitar family.

But we're not reviewing an old Gibson, and although we only have a volume here (no tone control), the circuit is very well tuned. Pulling back the volume just lightens things and loses a little high-end sharpness but leaves plenty of clout for some ballsy rhythm 'n' riffing duties. Pushed up, however, the Mojo switch changes the character, becoming lighter, definitely more single-coil-like or perhaps Filter'Tron-

COST CONTROL

Just how did Manson achieve the price point here? Let's find out

The last time we got our hands on a new Manson design was the ORYX, co-designed with Adam 'Nolly' Getgood, back in issue 488. It was the first unlimited Manson model to be made entirely in the UK and currently costs from £2,899. And while the new Juniors continue that all-UK concept, they retail at around half of that price. We talk to Manson's CEO, Adrian Ashton, to find out more.

What made you produce a guitar at this price?

"The last two years have been the most challenging I've known for some time: a combination of economics, pandemics, inflation, rising costs. Some of those things are always around, but they all met in a perfect storm. We decided to bring more in-house and get into more affordable stuff from here in Ashburton.

"It was almost a test for us. We already had the outline shapes so it was an exercise in seeing what price we could make them here in the UK. Because we're a company with such a backstory, things tend to evolve and you don't always do the really strict analysis of every aspect of the manufacturing. But for this we did. So we precisely looked at everything. How long does it take to glue the woods together? How long does it take to cut the body? What's the best wood to use... and so on, that will bring this to a certain price point? Could we still use our in-house pickups? We wanted to, and Simon Thorn came up with a new pickup design, the Dirty Rascal. We really carefully managed and analysed all these different aspects as a team. We looked at everything, like the output jack position [on the scratchplate], which we thought was pretty cool and it saves a manufacturing operation. We knew we had to look at all these processes – because we also knew we wanted quality top-spec hardware – to get it to the sort of price point we wanted it to be."

> "The most difficult thing was deciding on the contours and the final look"
>
> ***Adrian Ashton***

You say you already had both body shapes, but the Verona is new, isn't it?

"Well, that came from Matt [Bellamy]. For years he was always saying he wanted this style of guitar with three single coils, possibly a vibrato: 'It's the guitar I don't have in my collection, but it needs to be a Manson!' We tried a few variations on our existing shapes, trying different pickups and hardware, but in the end we decided to go with a total clean sheet and start from scratch. We did do a guitar for an artist – who I can't name – that was actually the first, and then we thought, 'Let's take it to version two.'

"I think the most difficult thing was deciding on the contours and the final look. Some makers will actually just take a third-party Strat-style body and put their own neck and hardware on it, but that's not really something we're about. We're trying to be a little more unique, different. But, then again, if you move too far from the tradition you start making something that's different from what you intended to make in the first place. We wanted to create a Manson version of a classic instrument.

Matt and Adrian in the studio with Muse drummer Dominic Howard

Manson Guitar Works' CEO, Adrian Ashton, and Matt Bellamy, the majority shareholder

"The Verona guitar came out with a gloss sunburst finish for Matt, he named it and used it on the *Will Of The People* tour in 2023. It was a great success and he came back and said, 'You guys have cracked it,' so quickly we had to make him another couple. So, hopefully, the Verona in that format will be coming out this year. But in the meantime, we thought, 'Let's do the Junior version and get it out as soon as possible.'"

Along with that new humbucking pickup, there's the rarely used series/parallel switch that seems like a throwback to the golden age of guitar tinkering in the 70s and 80s. Why does Manson use that over the more commonly used coil-split?

"We love it! We call it the Mojo switch. It's been on our guitars for well over a decade, but we gave it that name because, you're right, it felt a bit 80s, yesterday's news. It does its job well and is a really usable tool. Obviously, we've had a lot of people asking for a coil-split, but in every test we'd do in the sound room with a new pickup, we'd use the series/parallel switch and conclude that it's so much more usable: you get that lighter, airier but still humbucking parallel sound that's great for clean and mild break-up. Then you have the series wiring for some extra edge or just leave it there for some harder riffing.

"The more we did it, and turned people onto the idea, the more they came back to us saying, 'You're right – it's much more usable than a coil-split,' which just seems to thin out the sound so much but never really sounds like a proper single coil.

"The Junior appears to be a super-simple guitar, but when you add in the kill-button and the series/parallel switching, there's quite a bit of fun stuff there. It's not just a one-trick pony in terms of its sounds." **[DB]**

PHOTOS BY JOLYON HOLROYD

This spoke wheel nut is a regular feature on Manson's builds and means it's very fast to make any truss rods adjustments

like, and with the volume full up, there's plenty of presence and yet pulling it back just rounds the high-end subtly. Kick in some reverb and a bit of slapback and we're in rockabilly street: it's turned into a Gretsch-y Esquire! The kill-button does all the stuttering you want and, to be honest, it's a surprisingly versatile single-pickup guitar with the quality of the frankly quite diverse sounds we're hearing. Bundle in the light weight, the raw resonance and the superb playability and this more than ticks the working guitar box. Enough words: there's playing to do!

The Verona Junior's light weight, raw resonance and superb playability more than tick the working guitar box

Verdict

When a guitar plays and sounds as good as this one, it's a little hard to be objective. As always, Manson's craft is superb, but even though this Junior is the most cost-effective guitar the brand builds here in the UK by quite a margin, there's nothing remotely cut-price about it. From the good weight and superb neck craft, to the very well-voiced single humbucker with some expansive options, not to mention the included Mono Sleeve gigbag, here's a working guitar that's superbly fit for purpose. That kill-button might suggest a more modernist aim, but the voicing of the Dirty Rascal humbucker is just as at home with your classic rock duties as it is with more progressive and heavily gained styles. Meanwhile, the cleaner parallel voice offers a very valid (and still hum-cancelling) single-coil-like flavour that gives the Junior a viable and usable duality.

Our only dilemma would be which body style to go for. But having played both, we wouldn't let that worry you too much. Either style sounds superb.

MANSON GUITAR WORKS VERONA JUNIOR

PRICE: £1,399 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cut bolt-on solidbody electric
BODY: Obeche
NECK: Maple, soft V profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Black Graph Tech/42.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Gotoh 6-saddle through-string bridge, Gotoh 510 HAP tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 1x Manson Dirty Rascal humbucker, kill-button, master volume (with push-push 'Mojo' series/parallel switch)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.31/7.28
OPTIONS: The single-cut MA Junior has the same price and spec, just a different body shape
RANGE OPTIONS: The UK-made ORYX range starts at £2,899, the same as the new MB-1 'New Era' models. Manson's licensed Indonesian-made Meta Series guitars start at £499
LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently
FINISHES: Neon Green (as reviewed), Miami Blue, Neon Pink, Dry Satin Black and Vivid Mustard Yellow – open-pore finish

Manson Guitar Works
01364 653751
www.mansonguitarworks.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Excellent craft: good weight, great neck and playability matched by the dual sounds of the humbucker; comes with a Mono Sleeve gigbag... Where's the stage?

CONS Some players might prefer a tone control instead of the kill-button

VICTORY THE DEPUTY COMPACT HEAD
£1,349

WHAT IS IT? Low-to-medium gain all-valve head developed in collaboration with Anderton's Peter 'Danish Pete' Honoré

Top Tone

Victory joins forces with Peter 'Danish Pete' Honoré once again to produce a compact signature model loaded with classic sounds

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

There's been a flurry of activity from Victory recently, with a new MKII version of The Kraken lunchbox head, designed in collaboration with Rabea Massaad. Just a few months later and here we are looking at another new 'designed in collaboration with' Victory amp. This time it's Peter 'Danish Pete' Honoré, formerly a world-class session player (working for artists such as Lionel Richie and Tom Jones), and now video manager and YouTube presenter for the well-known guitar store Andertons. Victory is continuing the USA law enforcement nomenclature, calling its new amp The Deputy. This isn't the first Victory amp Honoré has been involved with – there was a tweaked version of the Duchess lunchbox head a few years ago called the DP40 – but The Deputy is more of a proper 'Danish Pete special', with a focused approach and some interesting features.

The Deputy fits into the same compact plywood head sleeve as other Victory amps and certainly looks the part, covered in heavyweight black Tolex set off by leather corner protectors, with a salt and pepper grille and a large Victory badge set on a chevron adding a touch of luxury. Inside the sleeve is a tough steel chassis that has silver-painted control panels supporting a pair of generously sized transformers. Inside, most of the electronics live on a typically high-quality printed circuit board, including the front-panel controls and all the valve bases. The soldering is clean and bright and the minimal wiring is neatly routed and twisted.

The Deputy is a low-to-medium gain design and features three 12AX7 preamp valves driving a fixed bias output stage based on a pair of Yugoslavian new-old-stock (NOS) 6CW5/EL86 pentode power valves, most likely made by Ei. Ei stands for 'Elektronska Industrija', a large electronics conglomerate in the former Yugoslavia, which made commercial and domestic electronic equipment including TV sets, radios and record players, and, of course, the valves that powered them.

Ei was among the last European valve manufacturers, declaring bankruptcy in 2016. The EL86 is similar to the more common EL84 but with a slightly higher anode current and lower anode voltage. Because they're less common in guitar amps, NOS supplies are still relatively plentiful, so it makes sense to use them. As a bonus, they produce slightly more power than the EL84. The pin-outs are identical, but the different voltages mean most EL84-powered amps can't be easily converted to use them.

VICTORY
INPUT
GAIN
VOICE
TREBLE
MIDDLE
BASS
REVERB
MASTER
The Deputy
ON
VICTORY

1. The excellent built-in digital reverb is likely the only reverb you'll need, going from subtle warm ambience to cathedral. A single-button footswitch plugs in on the rear panel to toggle the effect on or off as needed

2. The Deputy's front control panel is easy to navigate. Optimal sounds seem to happen with all knobs at 12 o'clock, giving the widest leeway for dialling in different instruments – a sure sign of good design

Victory's The Deputy is a straightforward single-channel design, with a single input jack socket feeding front-panel controls for Gain, Treble, Middle and Bass, Reverb level and a Master volume. There's also a three-way Bright switch, which offers mild or more pronounced treble emphasis, with an off position, while a second three-way toggle switch called Voice adds a gain boost and a treble boost on top of the default setting.

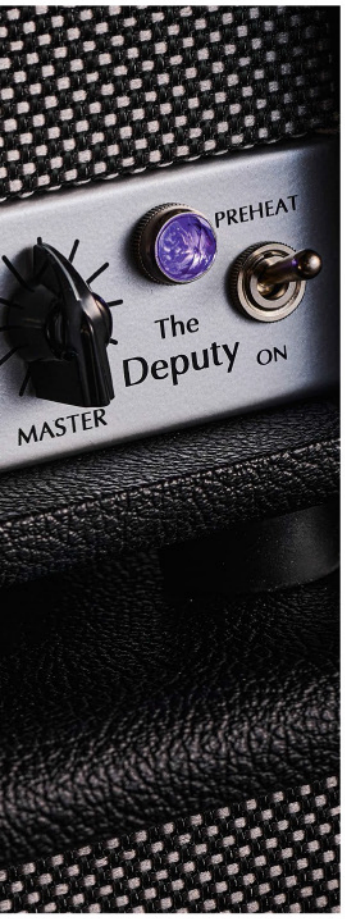
3. Like most Victory amps, The Deputy has bias test points and adjustment on the rear panel, making it easier and safer to keep the output valves running at peak efficiency. While the bias readings are separate, the bias voltage is global, so using matched output valves will give the best results

On the rear panel, you'll find a fixed level series effects loop, a trio of fixed impedance speaker outlets and a single footswitch jack, which toggles The Deputy's digital reverb effect on or off. There's also a set of bias test points with a recessed adjustment screw. You can measure the bias voltage separately for both EL86s, but the voltage isn't independently adjustable, so the output valves need to be reasonably well matched. Usefully, there's enough range to rebias The Deputy to accept EL84s.

In Use & Sounds

We used our regular Strat and Les Paul to try out The Deputy, along with a selection of pedals. This amp has a sweet treble, warm midrange and a medium-tight bass response that's equally flattering for single coils and humbuckers. The lower gain settings sound superb, coaxing every last overtone and harmonic from the guitar for epic clean sounds with excellent string separation.

Move the Gain control upwards to around 10 o'clock and you're in that magic zone where The Deputy will begin to bark if you hit the strings hard – but back off with the pick and those wonderful clean sounds will return. Turn up the gain some more and The Deputy produces some



4. There are two three-way toggle switches: Bright gives two stages of treble emphasis plus an off; Voice adds around 6dB of gain, with an upper mid/treble boost, plus an off

5. The Deputy benefits from a simple fixed-level series effects loop. If you use time-based effects, like chorus or delay, this is the best place to plug them in to minimise noise and improve the effect depth

seriously addictive vintage pre-JCM800 Marshall tones. With a Strat it can nail SRV's *Couldn't Stand The Weather* or Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Under The Bridge* and *Give It Away*, while switching to a Les Paul will let you convincingly emulate 1970's ZZ Top tunes like *La Grange* or *Cheap Sunglasses*.

The low-to-medium gain configuration also makes The Deputy an ideal platform for pedals, whether you use the effects loop or, like us, you put all the pedals at the front of the input socket. We used a simple arrangement of Dunlop Cry Baby, Neo Micro Vent 122 and a digital delay, producing a wonderful variety of inspiring vintage and contemporary sounds, while relying on The Deputy's outstanding touch-sensitive gain to provide the overdrive.

Verdict

Unlike the instant mega-gain gratification of VX The Kraken MKII, Victory's The Deputy is for 'feel' players who like amps that respond to playing dynamics, sounding clean with a light touch but getting dirty as you hit the strings hard. The Deputy does this with consummate ease and takes very little time to dial in for humbuckers or single coils thanks to the Bright and Voice switches.

Partnered with a decent Stratocaster, it's sonic dynamite that can cover Hendrix, SRV, Mayer and many more

We love its classic late-60s Marshall vibe, which sounds great with a Les Paul, but partnered with a decent Stratocaster, it's sonic dynamite that can cover Hendrix, SRV, Mayer and many more. It's interesting that many classic recordings from the 'golden era' of the late 1960s to the early 70s used very little distortion but still managed to sound huge. The Deputy's built-in digital reverb and oversized 1x12 cabinet sweeten those tones, adding a ready-to-record ambience that just needs a couple of decent mics to capture, while the relatively modest 25-watt output produces plenty of level for live use.

Aimed at players after a satisfying vintage tone experience, The Deputy is ideal for professional and serious-amateur use. For an amp that's designed and handmade in the UK, we reckon it's great value for money, too, and should give some far more expensive boutique exotica a run for the money.

VICTORY THE DEPUTY COMPACT HEAD

PRICE: £1,349
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: All-valve pre and power amp
VALVES: 3x 12AX7 preamp, 2x NOS EL86
OUTPUT: 25W RMS
DIMENSIONS: 390 (w) x 220 (d) x 220mm (h)
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 8/17.6
CABINET: Plywood/Steel
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Gain, treble, middle, bass, reverb level, master volume, Bright switch, Voice switch
FOOTSWITCH: Single-button footswitch toggles reverb on/off (supplied)
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Digital reverb, series effects loop, bias test points and overall bias adjustment on rear panel
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The Duchess DP40 lunchbox (another Danish Pete collaboration) is £1,269; 1x12 extension cabinets start at £679; 2 x12 from £889; the full-fat 4x12 is £1,299

Victory Amplification
www.victoryamps.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS British-design and build using top-quality components; low-to-medium gain preamp and 25-watt EL86 output stage are a vintage tone goldmine with highly responsive dynamics

CONS More could be done with series effects loop, maybe a bypass switch and a choice of send levels to suit pedals or rack gear; lacks ability to adjust the bias voltage separately for each output valve

PROFILER
KEMPER
KONE
MASTER VOL
FX 1
FX 2
GAIN
NOISE GATE
BANK
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
RIG VOL
VOL
TAP
TUNER
1
2
3
4
5
INPUT
TUNER

KEMPER PROFILER PLAYER
£619

WHAT IS IT? Pedalboard-friendly profiler that plays the full range of current rigs, including the latest Liquid Profiles, within the limitations of four effects slots

Little Green Monster

With the pedalboard user in mind, Kemper has downsized for its compact new Profiler Player

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Olly Curtis

It's fair to say that the arrival of the Kemper Profiler amplifier in 2011 was a disruptive event in the digital amp modelling niche market. Up until that point, we'd been happy to take the software and hardware we'd been given by manufacturers and use it with varying degrees of success. Christoph Kemper's radical approach was to use his proprietary software to extract the DNA of any amplifier's sound and save it as a unique model (the Profile) that could then be tweaked with EQ, effects and so on.

From the start, the Kemper polarised opinions – there were players who got it and others who didn't – but over time the all-important software has been vastly developed and improved. Consequently, Kemper has kept up with the competition and continues to be relevant, with new concepts such as Liquid Profiles and seriously powerful new products including the Profiler Stage floorboard and Kabinet. We've also seen Kemper's Rig Manager software extended to mobile devices running Android and iOS.

Now there's another hardware addition that's going to be of particular interest to pedalboard users, the Profiler Player. As the name suggests, this is a compact Kemper that focuses on playing your favourite selections from the many thousands of Kemper Rigs out there, within the limitations of its four effect slots. The rugged, stage-ready construction has a similar look to the Profiler Stage but with a graphite-painted steel case and green/grey overlays. The folded construction is complex yet perfectly executed, with a neat perforated panel on the underside for ventilation purposes.

On the top panel are rotary controls with integrated push-button switches for FX, Master Volume, Gain, Bass, Middle and Treble, and Rig Volume level. Illuminated button switches select and edit various features including the Player's Bluetooth and Wi-Fi functions, with three assignable heavy duty footswitches.

You'll find the essential connectivity on the unit's rear panel, including a single instrument input jack, a stereo pair of output jacks, an expression pedal jack and a headphones socket, together with a single balanced XLR. There are two USB sockets: a Type A that's used for firmware updates and backups, with a Type B for

1. The Gain control is surrounded by a permanent ring of LEDs so you can instantly see how much gain is in use. Other controls make use of the bank/patch LEDs for a visual display

2. The Profiler Player can store up to 50 Rigs, organised in 10 banks of five, that are accessible from the footswitches or Bank select buttons. You can also get to these using Kemper's Rig Manager app, which works on desktops via USB or mobile devices via Wi-Fi

USB recording, MIDI and connection to a desktop Rig Manager. Finally, on the far right of the rear panel is a socket for the external DC power supply and a slot for a Kensington lock. The Profiler Player looks the part and behind the attractive outer shell it's reassuringly tough, ready for professional pedalboard life.

In Use & Sounds

We tried out the Profiler Player with our regular Les Paul and Strat plugged into a budget PC audio interface, using the USB and balanced XLR outputs. There's about a 12-second wait for the Kemper to power up, with a visual indication from the bank and patch LEDs lighting up in white to form a progress ladder. Once the boot process is complete, the LEDs change to indicate the Kemper is in active mode and ready for use.

The pre-loaded Rig sounds are mostly very impressive, covering a wide range of American and British-influenced amp tones. They sit well in live and recorded mixes, usually with little or no tweaking. The effects vary from very good to superb, with highlights including the rotary speaker emulator and some of the hall reverbs.

There's no text display, so at first glance you're reliant on knowing what the Profiler Player's various multi-coloured LEDs are telling you. For detailed information, you need to connect the Profiler Player to Kemper's Rig Manager app, either via USB or by using the Player's built-in Wi-Fi interface. Connecting a smartphone is quick and easy, providing instant control and feedback, although the smaller screen means a fair amount of swiping and tapping. It's much easier on a large desktop display.

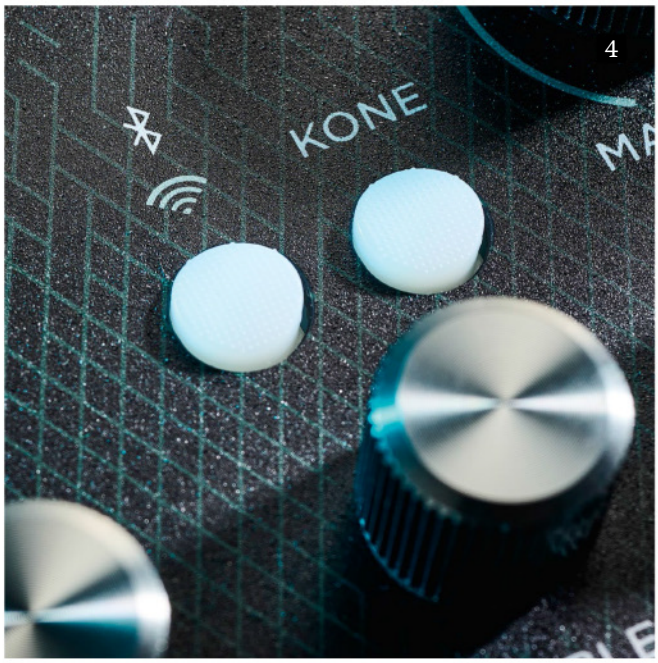
By now, it should be clear that a thorough read of the 165-page manual is not an option; to be fair to Kemper, as you become used to its way of doing things the workflows are logical and get easier with practice. The Profiler Player can store 50 Rigs in 10 banks of five, with multi-coloured LEDs changing from red, green, violet, blue and yellow, to let you know which bank you're in. The three footswitches can be set to work in a number of different ways. However, the default mode is the most useful, with the outer two buttons stepping up and down through Rigs and banks, while

3. There are four effects slots, arranged in two groups before the Rig Profile and two after. Of the wide range of quality onboard effects, many can be controlled by an optional expression pedal

> The professionally recorded Profiles loaded in the Profiler Player are highly authentic and augmented with quality effects

4. Bluetooth is used to stream audio and Wi-Fi to access the Rig Manager controller app, either joining trusted local networks or creating its own. Next to the Bluetooth/Wi-Fi button is the Kone button, which integrates with Kemper's powered Kabinet, running in either full-range mode or Speaker Imprint mode, with a choice of 19 onboard IR settings

5. The Profiler Player offers stereo outputs to unbalanced jack or headphones, with a mono balanced XLR. Two separate USB sockets handle firmware updates and backups, together with desktop connections to the Rig Manager app, direct recording and MIDI



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the centre button toggles the effects on and off. Most of the rotary controls have extra functions available from pressing them; for example, push-dialling the Gain control operates the input noise gate. The Profile Player's noise gate is excellent, making it easy to squash the extra hum when using single coils in a high-gain patch, and it takes external pedals quite well, though there's no built-in loop.

Verdict

As increasing numbers of people are now saying, digital technology has finally come of age where guitar amplification is concerned. The professionally recorded Profiles loaded in Kemper's Profiler Player are highly authentic and augmented with quality effects. Out of the box, there's something to suit any genre, from acoustic folk to jazz, country to classic rock, and every sub-faction of metal you can think of.

If you still can't find anything that works for you, then you can always browse the thousands of Kemper Rigs available online, within the Profile Player's limitation of four effects modules, two before and two after the amp Rig.

The Profiler Player's compact dimensions mean it will fit on most pedalboards, but pay attention to the power supply, which has to provide a hefty 2.5 amps at start-up, considerably reducing your third-party power supply choice. The Player's lack of display and reliance on multi-coloured LEDs also mean it's perhaps not quite as accessible for live use.

However, in a studio, with Rig Manager hooked up on a widescreen display, it's a powerful tool and great fun to use. Aimed at dedicated amateurs and professionals, while perhaps best-suited to existing Kemper users, we think it's good value for money and well worth a look.

5

KEMPER PROFILE PLAYER

PRICE: £619 (in-store; also available direct from Kemper)
ORIGIN: Germany
TYPE: Digital modelling preamp
DIMENSIONS: 145 (w) x 166 (d) x 68mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.1/2.4
CABINET: Steel
CONNECTIONS: Single instrument input, stereo unbalanced output jack, stereo headphones jack, expression pedal jack, mono balanced XLR. USB-A socket for firmware backups and updates, USB-B socket for Rig Manager desktop connection, MIDI and recording
CHANNELS: 50 Kemper Rigs, organised in 10 banks of 5, 136 onboard effects
CONTROLS: Gain, bass, middle, treble, rig volume, master volume, FX1 level, FX2 level. 6x bank select and store buttons, tap/tuner button, FX1 and FX2 select/edit buttons, Bluetooth Wi-Fi control button, Kemper Kone select button
FOOTSWITCH: 3x integral custom-assignable footswitches
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Bluetooth audio streaming, Wi-Fi or USB connection to Kemper Rig Manager, USB audio recording, integral tuner. Kensington security lock slot
POWER: 9-12V DC from external adaptor (supplied). NB: Initial start-up current draw needs a minimum 2,500mA supply
OPTIONS: Kemper-optimised Mission EP1-KP expression pedal is £138; powered Kemper Kabinet is £489
RANGE OPTIONS: The full-sized, fully featured Kemper Profiler Stage floorboard is £1,098

Kemper GmbH
+49 2361 970 97 77
www.kemper-amps.com

8/10

PROS Impressive, authentic real amp tones that cover a wide range of musical genres; high-quality effects; wide dynamic range; super-low noise performance; rugged build quality

CONS Initially bewildering controls for non-Kemper users; no graphical text display; no integral effects loop; multi-coloured LEDs may be an issue for colour-blind players; unusually high current power specs reduce third party power supply choice

DANELECTRO NICHOLS 1966
£189

WHAT IS IT? Steve Ridinger-designed fuzz/distortion pedal with quite a backstory

Canyon Classic

A pedal designed by a teenager in the Hollywood Hills back in 1966 is revived for today's players

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. Maybe following the trend for reliced guitars, there are now six pedals in Danelectro's Vintage series all with a similarly distressed finish. Besides the missing paint, dents and scratches on the chassis, even the plastic knobs look ingrained with dirt

2. Two tonal variations are available via the toggle switch: Stock offers the full frequency sound of the original design, while Mid Cut delivers a modern smiley face midrange curve

3. It's an interesting concept having knobs for both Fuzz and Drive. Each offers a completely different vibe used individually, but together they can combine for a range of drive/distortion/fuzz sounds

What were you doing aged 14? Chances are it wasn't quite what Steve Ridinger was up to, which was designing the circuitry of a fuzz-meets-distortion pedal, building the units and selling them on. In 1966, Ridinger, current Danelectro boss and founder of Foxx pedals, was living with his parents in Nichols Canyon, Los Angeles, where he came up with the circuit at the heart of this latest pedal release. Named the Liverpool Fuzz Tone (and selling 3,000 units at the time), the design has now resurfaced as the Nichols 1966 and joins the Eisenhower Fuzz and 3699 Fuzz, among others, in Dano's range of vintage-based pedals with distressed enclosures.

A Volume knob sets the output volume, while a Tone knob offers a wide range of variation – but it's the juxtaposition of the Fuzz and Drive knobs that dials in your sound. Leaving the Fuzz at zero, you can dial in varying degrees of soft-clipping overdrive with the Drive control, from just adding a little edge to your clean sound through to gritty, breaking-up drive. Simply turning up the Fuzz knob without the Drive doesn't result in fuzz per se, although you can dial in some usable drive/distortion tones, especially if you engage the Mid Cut toggle switch with its midrange scoop, which emphasises top- and bottom-end, and make use of the Tone knob to roll off bottom-end as you move it clockwise.

What's obvious is that the Fuzz and Drive knobs are best used in conjunction and that's what really brings the pedal to life – think of it like the drive adding the edge that the fuzz needs, or the fuzz giving thickness and body to the drive. Between the two of them you can build in a wide range of raunchy distortion tones, all with good touch response and clean-up. But things get altogether more fuzz-like once the Fuzz knob is into its last quadrant. Advancing it further, combined with a chosen degree of Drive, you will get thick, sustaining fuzz.

Verdict

It's good to see something fresh in dirt pedals – if an almost 60-year-old circuit could be described as such. The Nichols 1966 is a unique circuit and you're sure to find it versatile. While its interactive knobs set you a task of dialling in your own sweet spot, there are plenty of those to be found for a variety of uses. G

DANELECTRO NICHOLS 1966

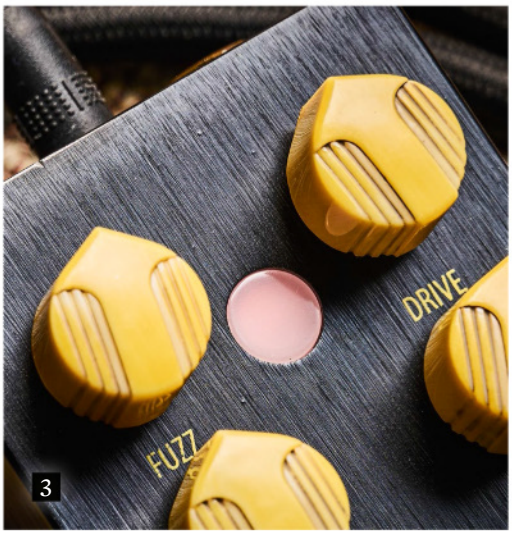
PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Fuzz/distortion pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Tone, Fuzz, Drive, Stock/Mid Cut switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 59 (w) x 112 (d) x 55mm (h)

John Hornby Skewes
0113 286 5381
www.danelectro.com

8/10

PROS Compact size; original circuit; drive and fuzz sounds available; Mid Cut option

CONS The 'distressed' finish won't have universal appeal



3

THE RIVALS

Okay, a compact pedal that straddles distortion and fuzz? Crazy Tube Circuits describes its Starlight (£149) as providing a smooth and liquid fuzz-distortion made for soloing. The pedal combines JFET and MOSFET gain stages to cover a huge gain range and has two toggle-switched voices, one with extra gain and high-mid presence. Elsewhere, the Skreddy Hybrid Fuzz Driver (£229) is described as having "amp-like, articulate boost, overdrive and light fuzz". Colorsound's Powerboost is another 1960s pedal that has had a revival, with fuzzy drive through to outright fuzz – you can find the circuit as one half of the Crazy Tube Circuits Hi Power (£235) as well as in other versions.

Silicon and germanium transistors give a cool blend in Skreddy's fuzz/overdrive/distortion

WALRUS AUDIO SILT HARMONIC FUZZ
£289

WHAT IS IT? Octave fuzz pedal powered by an ECC82/12AU7 preamp valve

Hot Fuzz

Walrus Audio puts a valve in a fuzz box for all to see, plus a special Harmonic mode, and invites you to dig into the Silt

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. You can see the ECC82/12AU7 valve doing its work through its backlit window in the middle of the unit. We have the black version of the pedal, but it's also available in red

2. The Harmonic footswitch engages a frequency doubler before the drive section, giving you an upper octave. You can switch it in and out when the pedal is engaged or choose to leave it active so you get the full composite sound when you engage the pedal

3. You can access instant tone shaping for the top or bottom frequencies via the Contour switch. Keep the switch in the centre for a flat response, or flick it upwards for a high-pass filter or downwards for low-pass

We've been seeing more fuzz boxes released than any other kind of pedal lately, several with a claim to having special characteristics. The latest from Walrus Audio is no exception, but its special characteristic is plain for all to see: a valve lit up in a front-panel window. The idea behind the pedal was to create a fuzz with the rich, harmonically complex texture that a real valve can provide, so Walrus Audio teamed up with valve expert Jim Hagerman to develop this design based around an ECC82/12AU7 preamp valve. It's a tidy-sized pedal, with sounds dialled in by three knobs and a three-way toggle switch, and it sports an extra footswitched Harmonic mode for some octave action.

Starting with the Gain knob at zero we get a nice crunchy drive tone, and with unity gain around noon, there's plenty of scope for delivering a boost with the Volume knob. The Tone knob, post-fuzz, is a tilt EQ that's basically flat in the centre, cutting highs and boosting lows to the left, and boosting top while rolling off lows clockwise. Small deviations either side of centre work great for matching the tone to various amps, but there's plenty of range if you want to get more extreme, especially if combined with the three-way contour switch that, besides a flat setting, offers either a high-pass or a low-pass filter to tweak the tone before it hits the fuzz stage. Extreme sounds aside, the Contour switch's attenuation of bottom- or top-end is a practical asset in compensating for different pickups.

Advancing the Gain knob takes you through various shades of distortion to fat fuzz, always with harmonic richness, decent string articulation and volume knob clean-up. There are some excellent sounds to be had here in standard nine-volt operation, but running the pedal at 12 volts squeezes out extra gain. Switching into Harmonic mode gives you another voice as a frequency doubler before the drive transforms the sound, adding throaty octave harmonic overtones. This thickens up dirty chordal work and delivers a distinctive tone for single-note leads – rich and gnarly with a hint of ring modulation.

Verdict

Yes, it's another fuzz box, but it's one that is particularly inspired – a great source for rich-sounding driven sounds with flexible EQ options, and the bonus of Harmonic mode that lets the sound really take off.

WALRUS AUDIO SILT HARMONIC FUZZ

PRICE: £289
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Tone, Gain, Contour switch (High-pass/Flat/Low-pass), Bypass footswitch, Harmonic footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V-12V DC adaptor (not supplied) 300 mA
DIMENSIONS: 92 (w) x 122 (d) x 57mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.walrusaudio.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Compact for a twin-footswitch pedal; great range of fuzz and distortion sounds; flexible EQ; footswitchable Harmonic mode

CONS Switching in Harmonic mode when the effect is engaged isn't as seamless as we'd like

3

THE RIVALS

A valve-based fuzz pedal is a rare thing, but there are others around. UK-based Effectrode has a whole range of valve-powered pedals and its fuzz is called the Mercury (£299). It features volume and fuzz knobs, plus a bias switch to alter the feel and sensitivity of the fuzz. The Kingsley Artisan ($480) is an overdrive/fuzz pedal using a 12AX7 pushed by a JFET transistor in a circuit that's not related to any of the traditional well-known fuzz circuits. More wallet-friendly is the Fender MTG Tube Distortion (£149), which uses an NOS US-made 6205 preamp valve and has three-band EQ and switchable boost.

Fender's MTG features a NOS US-made 6205 preamp valve

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

Sheeran By Lowden 'Stadium Edition' £4,500

Contact PHONE **+44 (0)28 4461 9161** WEB **www.sheeranguitars.com** WORDS **David Mead** PHOTOGRAPHY **Olly Curtis**

In 2012, Ed Sheeran asked George Lowden to build a guitar for his friend, Gary Lightbody of Snow Patrol. The upshot of that gesture was the birth of the diminutive Wee Lowden body shape, which has been in the Lowden catalogue ever since. More recently, Ed himself was seen to adopt the Wee Lowden for his own performances and, in a further collaboration, the company introduced the Sheeran range.

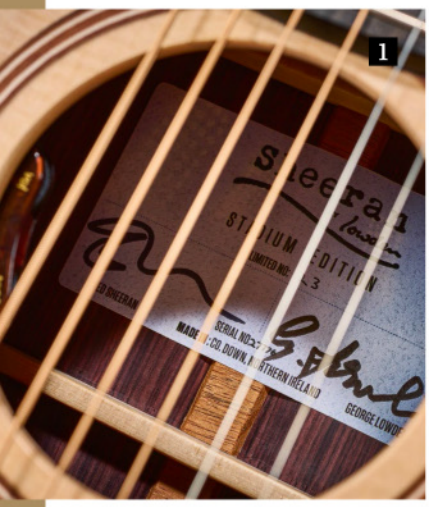
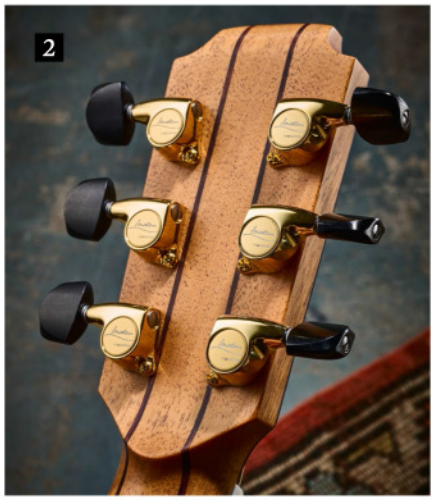
With this range, the aim was "to give young, aspiring players access to a quality guitar; encouraging them to learn, progress and create music" and the price was set to a more affordable sub-£1k mark. But if you wondered about the spec of Ed's own instrument used for his stadium shows, wonder no more because it's now been made available as a limited edition. Only 150 of the Stadium Edition are being built, and they will be signed by both Ed and George Lowden. As expected, they will have a significantly higher price point than those available under the standard Sheeran banner.

To say the Stadium Edition is diminutive would be an understatement. At a tip-to-toe length of only 940mm with a body depth of 71mm, it's reminiscent of a three-quarter size classical guitar. But Lowden states this guitar is aimed specifically at live playing with a 'stadium voicing' carve and bracing pattern to the instrument's top, and an LR Baggs Element VTC pickup/preamp system onboard as a stage-bound turbo charge. So, taking all that into account, this replica of Ed's own guitar, used on the record-breaking Mathematics tour, isn't exactly lacking in oomph.

Other vital stats include a Sitka spruce top with Indian rosewood back and sides, Lowden's excellent standard carve five-piece mahogany/rosewood neck, a 45mm nut width and a short scale length of 610mm (24 inches). As expected, the workmanship is spot on, right down to the math-symbol inlays on the ebony 'board.

Because this guitar has been designed for the stage, acoustically speaking it's perhaps not going to satisfy the living room player, as it's a wee little chap with a suitably wee-ish voice. That's not to say it suffers from any boxiness you might associate with smaller-bodied acoustics. Quite the contrary. It accounts for itself very well across the frequency spectrum, but hardened acoustic players will miss that sturdiness in the bass and the kind of projection you'd expect from larger instruments. As to its plugged-in voice, well, that's another matter. Any misgivings are turned around as the sound here is rich, full and stadium fit! G

1. The Sheeran Stadium edition is limited to 150 guitars worldwide. Each bears Ed Sheeran's and George Lowden's signatures on the label inside the soundhole
2. Gotoh 510 tuners sit atop the Sheeran's five-piece mahogany and rosewood neck
3. The inlays on the ebony fretboard are the mathematical symbols that reflect the titles of Ed Sheeran's albums



4. The Stadium Edition's body size is based upon the Wee Lowden and features a Sitka spruce top with Indian rosewood on the back and sides, plus an ebony 'board

5. The guitar has what Lowden refers to as 'stadium bracing' for better tone production and a thin body to reduce feedback

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

PRS S2 2024 Series £1,925 to £2,675

CONTACT **PRS Europe** PHONE **01223 874301** WEB **www.prsguitars.com**

JARGON CRUNCHING

Scarf-jointed necks
PRS saves on production costs and waste material with the S2s by using a scarf joint (a join of two pieces) to attach the headstock to the neck, rather than making the whole lot out of one piece.

The S2 series has been around for a while, hasn't it?

It has. In fact, the S2 series celebrated its 10th birthday in 2023, having been introduced in 2013 to offer a lower-priced, USA-made range of PRS electrics. So (in a nutshell and ignoring some of PRS's upgrades and sub-categories) we have Private Stock at the very top of the production tree, followed closely by the Core and Bolt-On models, then S2, and finally the entry-level SE series.

But if these are made in the US, why would we buy a Core model?

That comes down to a couple of things: options and price. The S2 range stands for Stevensville 2. They're made in the Stevensville, Maryland factory, but in order to keep the price down PRS adapted some of its manufacturing processes. As well as this, the range features familiar PRS shapes such as the Custom and the McCarty Singlecut, but it's also the exclusive home to the Vela models.

S2 LINE-UP: There are 13 designs in the 2024 S2 range, with four Standards, four Vela models, three McCarty guitars and a pair of Custom 24s. For 2024, PRS has upgraded the S2's electronics, with 85/15, 58/15 LT, Narrowfield or TCI pickups, depending on your guitar choice. There are loads of finish options, ranging from four Satin and five gloss finishes for the Standards, while the Custom and McCarty models come in a choice of six trans glosses. They're nitro on every model

S2 CUSTOM 24

S2 CUSTOM 24-08

S2 MCCARTY 594

S2 STANDARD 22

S2 STANDARD 24

S2 VELA

S2 MCCARTY 594 SINGLECUT

S2 MCCARTY 594 THINLINE

The S2 models – including this S2 Standard 24 Satin in Vintage Cherry – are made in Stevensville, Maryland, and offer a more affordable route to a US-made PRS

Right, so they're put together with cheaper wood alternatives and stuff?
Not exactly, no. At the heart of the S2 range is the meat-and-potatoes stew of mahogany bodies, mahogany necks, maple tops and rosewood for the fingerboards. We even get the bird inlays! There's the carving we're used to seeing, too. Obviously, PRS is going to reserve its fancier top options for the more expensive models, but these are 100 per cent PRS guitars in materials, concept and design. A quick glance at the model pictures opposite serves as the proof.

Okay, so how can they be cheaper?
A big part of it comes down to the use of materials. A scarfed neck/headstock joint reduces the amount of raw materials needed, and the fingerboards are pre-radius'd and pre-fretted, cutting down the time it takes to make an S2 neck. At the body end, features such as loaded scratchplates on certain models and satin finish options keep things efficient and quicker to make. Plus, S2 models come with gigbags, which cost less and make shipping from the factory cheaper, too.

The biggest news for the 2024 S2 series is they now all come with PRS USA electronics as standard

I suppose they put cheaper pickups in, too?
Funny you should ask – because that brings us to the biggest news for the 2024 S2 series, and that is they now all come with PRS USA electronics as standard. That's the same pickups as found in the Core line-up. And while it might seem like a pretty subtle change, this is the first time they've been offered outside of the main US-made range. Depending on the model, you'll get 85/15, 58/15 LT, Narrowfield or TCI pickups in your S2.

Fair play! What are the options, then?
There are many and the full S2 range includes 13 models: S2 Standard 22 and 24 (£1,925 for both Satin; £2,050 for both gloss); S2 Vela (£1,999 Satin and £2,259 gloss) and Vela Semi-Hollow (£2,079 Satin and £2,259 gloss); S2 Custom 24 (£2,465) and Custom 24-08 (£2,575); and S2 McCarty 594 (£2,675), McCarty 594 Singlecut (£2,675) and McCarty 594 Thinline (£2,359). They'll be shipping by the time you read this. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

KNAGGS CHENA A £TBC

Joe Knaggs knows a thing or two about building guitars, but he also knows about playing them, too. The Chena A model was born out of a suggestion by Knaggs artist Larry Mitchell that Knaggs should produce a guitar to suit Joe's jazz style – a jazz box with integral bracing, a spruce top and a mahogany back, which is 3/8-inch thicker than a regular Chena model. The neck is also mahogany, with a rosewood fingerboard, and electronically it's fitted with a Lollar dog-ear P-90, as well as a Fishman piezo. It's available now: check the Knaggs website to find your nearest dealer.
www.knaggsguitars.com

LINE 6 CATALYST CX AMPS & POD EXPRESS FROM £285 & £199

You might have noticed, but gear brands *really* want to make it easier for us to practise. Line 6 is taking away the excuses with its new Catalyst CX amps and POD Express amp and effects processor. The Catalyst range has been expanded with three new combos (60, 100 and 200 watts), while their amp models have doubled to 12, with 24 effects derived from the Helix (six delay, mod, pitch and filter, and reverb). They're competitively priced, too, starting at around £285 for the CX 60. Meanwhile, the POD Express (£199) can be battery powered (PSU optional), with guitar and bass versions both offering seven amps and cabs, and 17 effects.
www.line6.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Nat Myers

Album: Yellow Peril (Easy Eye Sound)

Nat Myers' debut album, *Yellow Peril*, was produced by The Black Keys' Dan Auerbach
www.gnatmyers.com

Nat Myers is a Korean-American Kansan who is making waves as a badass bluesman. With the snappy Dan Auerbach-produced debut album, *Yellow Peril* out in the wild, Nat has plenty of hours logged on the road, and when we meet he's keeping Willie Watson company. "Willie was one of the first fellas to take me on the road," Nat begins, with his distinctive drawl. "We're like two peas in a pod and I can't get him to shut up right now. I love listening to him talk and he knows it."

Solo Performance

Although there are accompaniments heard on *Yellow Peril*, Nat's preferred touring setup is him solo, a decision that suits his old-school sounding blues. "Yeah, I'm just by my lonesome, sir," he smiles. "People ask if I'm going to get a band and I'm like, 'I got into playing this music because I don't want no band!' I know some shitkickers back home who I like running around with, but the goose ain't worth the gander for anyone but myself right now. Maybe down the line…

"Actually, one of my favourite things about blues guitar is the accompaniment," he continues. "Not the person leading the solo but the one who knows the perfect bass line and keeps it simple. I'm an accompanist kind of man."

The Mule's Presence

We jump into guitar chat, with Nat having switched from his Mule resonator to acoustic for these live dates. "The Mule just strikes people in a different way," he tells us. "Even though they're pretty common in the blues and folk communities, not a lot of people know what the fuck that thing is. So you pull it out and it catches attention, but it also twangs a little deeper and has this drag. It's like what Lonnie Johnson said when someone asked him why he stopped playing acoustic: it's because no-one fucking listens to you! But I've been playing smaller rooms with Willie and they're much more oriented towards listening, so I can get the acoustic out again."

The Ramblin' Man

Nat has an innate desire to be free and outside, so a gigging blues musician is a good fit for him. "Some of my first gigs were before I had a [driving] licence," he says, "so I had to walk a mile or two to get to shows. I'm a ramblin' man and I've been walking my whole life, but this is the first time I've been able to professionally ramble. I'm now able to make a cut from being out and about.

"My dad's and mum's stories have unintentional odysseys: my mum is from Pusan [South Korea] and came to the States with $25 in quarters; my dad enlisted in '69 and went to Korea, where he met my mum. My entire childhood was spent in fold-out campers and we would travel all across the contiguous United States. I've seen all four corners of the country, but it often seems like a dream to me."

Recording With Dan Auerbach

What also seemed like a dream was catching Dan Auerbach's eye and having him offer to cut *Yellow Peril*. "What's really cool about Dan is he never waves the fact that he's Dan Auerbach around," Nat says. "You just sit and talk about music and play music; it's pretty blissful over at Easy Eye [Sound in Nashville]. We could have recorded at the studio, because it's a great room, but moving it over to Dan's 200-year-old house gave it this resonance that we were able to capture in this beautiful way. And we kept it raw. Maybe we could've cleaned up the audio, but it would have been less than what it is. Truth be told, it was a really great time." **[GK]**

PHOTO BY: JIM HERRINGTON

Wandering is in Nat's blood, so he's happy to lean into the one-man ramblin' band lifestyle

Standout track: *Pray For Rain*
For fans of: Charlie Parr, Ry Cooder, RL Burnside

"People ask if I'm going to get a band... but the goose ain't worth the gander for anyone but myself right now"

MUSIC AS MEDICINE

Exploring big issues with the pioneers of blues

The album's title track hones in on racial unrest and political tensions experienced in the United States. "I was getting into some Charley Patton when I wrote it," he explains. "I always appreciated his ability to describe something like the boll weevil [infestation of the late 1800s and early 1900s] and cotton blight in this humorous way. The thing about *Boll Weevil Blues*, from Ma Rainey to Woody Guthrie [versions], is that they're funny stories. They were performed to people who might have lost everything, but it allowed them to laugh at it."

PHOTO BY TYLER ZWIEP

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

Richard Thompson doesn't sweeten the pill with his top-notch folk-rock songwriting

PHOTO BY DAVID KAPTEIN

Richard Thompson

Ship To Shore

New West Records (available 31 May) — **9/10**

Taut, barbed folk-rock that doesn't hide the scars

Imagine a row of guitars from a guitar-maker you admire. You know you'll probably like all the instruments but maybe one or two will have that little extra something. It could be said that Richard Thompson's albums are a bit like that, too.

Thompson maintains a taut standard for all his records, which are never less than serious pieces of musical craftsmanship, the lyrics always shrewd and incisive – not without compassion of a kind but avoiding sentimentality at all times. The result is typically great but, as mentioned, some albums from Thompson rise just a touch above the others, like the topmast of a ship on the horizon.

Opener *Freeze* captures people teetering on the brink of misfortune, the narrative propelled by a driving, piratical rhythm and an almost shanty-like descending melody, tumbling down like the fortunes of the song's hard-luck characters. Thompson's playing is deft, effortlessly peeling off lines of double-stops from his (assumed) Strat, that seem imbued with the spirit of British folk for all their edgy electricity.

Thompson has an expertise for painting portraits of jilted men and, true to form, *Ship To Shore* offers us one of his best examples since the brilliant *Uninhabited Man*, with *What's Left To Lose*, which shows off his brilliant knack for chord changes that seem unexpected yet perfectly connected.

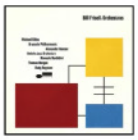
Overall, the album feels more consistent and coherent than his last LP *13 Rivers*, its narrative and melodic thread as strong as a hawser. Masterly. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Turnstile Casanova*
For fans of: Fairport Convention, The Magpie Arc, Elvis Costello

Bill Frisell

Orchestras

Blue Note Records (available now) — **10/10**



Jazzman teams with classical ensembles for sonic delights

You can't pin down Bill Frisell. Like his jazz contemporaries, John Scofield and Pat Metheny, he never sits on his laurels and often creates surprise and delight with new flights of fancy. And that sure is the case with this new release. *Orchestras* sees his jazz trio augmented by two ensembles, the 60-piece Brussels Philharmonic and the 11-piece Umbria Jazz Orchestra.

The big version is a three-disc release (the standard version is two discs) with 23 tracks that are either Frisell's own compositions or standards he has enjoyed playing in the past. There's his own *Strange Meeting* alongside Billy Strayhorn's *Lush Life* and two versions of Ron Carter's *Doom*, just for starters.

Central to it all is his guitar, often taking centre stage with his chord and single-note playing, clean toned other than the occasional use of tremolo and ambience effects. Jazzy with film noir vibes, it's an album of cultivated beauty and depth that will enrich with each listen. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Lush Life*
For fans of: Pat Metheny, John Scofield

Sam Lees

Emporium

Self-released (available 22 April) — **8/10**

Driving instrumental-rock debut with a sharp edge of shred

A brilliant clinician for top guitar brands, notably Wilkinson, Sam Lees has produced a corker with *Emporium*.

Comprising 14 tracks of muscular but melodic rock that takes 90s shred as a touchstone (especially Satriani's *The Extremist)* the album still brings a sure-footed sense of song-structure to the proceedings. The bluesy, ballistic rock of *Anybody Listening* demonstrates fluid playing, with lovely timing, but the powder stays dry until it's time to detonate, keeping things powerfully melodic then throwing in fast licks like a shower of sparks.

It's less ear-fatiguing than giving you both barrels straight away and sets the tone of an album that's about music, and not showing off. Nice cameos by Sam Wood and others heighten this highly enjoyable debut. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Double Trouble* (with Sam Wood)
For fans of: Satriani, Vai, Def Leppard, Van Halen

Rosie Frater-Taylor mesmerises with her soulful new album

Rosie Frater-Taylor

Featherweight

Cooking Vinyl (available now)

8/10

Jimmy Page-endorsed artist releases intriguing new album

Rising UK singer/guitarist Rosie Frater-Taylor is a refreshing new musician who marries great guitar chops with interestingly multi-layered songs. With accolades from Jimmy Page and outstanding social media engagement, she blends broad stylistic traits that span Joni Mitchell to Stevie Wonder and John Mayer to Everything Everything in a rock-pop-soul-jazz hybrid cluster of vibrant colour.

With 11 tracks her guitar-playing ranges from extended chord arpeggiating to jazzy intervallic single-note passages, often preferring clean or pushed clean tones for clarity of articulation. Her cover of TLC's pop R 'n' B classic, *No Scrubs* brings plenty of great clean humbucker tones. The juddering groove of *Skin Deep* is full of sophisticated chord playing, angular shifts and angelic vocals. *Hold The Weather* is the first single and intrigues as the triplet rhythms ricochet around the band and the outro births ear-twisting rock riff lines. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Hold The Weather*
For fans of: Nadine Shah, Nick Drake

Gentle Giant

The Missing Piece

Alucard (available now)

9/10

Steven Wilson remix of classic prog album

Originally released in 1977, *The Missing Piece* marked a change of pace for Gentle Giant. With shorter, rockier tracks to the fore, the band was responding to the onset of punk as well as record company pressure to 'do a Genesis' and produce prog-tinged hit singles. Alas no hits were created, although tracks like *I'm Turning Around* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* represent noble attempts to fuse prog to pop. It's the quirky ballads that resonate here, however, as in *As Old As You're Young* and the excellent *Memories Of Old Days*, still sounding brilliantly fresh and sonorous today.

Singer Derek Shulman is on record as saying the original mix lacked bass, owing to technical problems, but Steven Wilson's magic in this 2024 remix has restored the low register nicely. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Memories Of Old Days*
For fans of: Yes, Genesis

THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

LA Guns' frontman **Tracii Guns** adds to his long list of collaborations as he teams up with hard rocker Jack Russell for new album *Medusa*

Artist: Tracii Guns

Album: Medusa (Frontiers Music SRL)

Jack Russell of Great White teams up with Guns for *Medusa*

Tracii Guns has long slung his Les Paul in bouts of rock 'n' roll excess as a longtime hair-metal icon with his namesake band, LA Guns. But lately he's been branching out through several side gigs, one of which features Jack Russell of Great White. Tracii joins us to dig into the tones behind his latest collaborative record (and beyond), *Medusa*.

What tones did you have in mind when you started the *Medusa* project?

"That record was really weird because, number one, I didn't initially write anything. And number two, they [Frontiers Records] leaked the songs over to me one at a time. So I never had an overall picture of what I thought that record would sound like; it was like hors d'oeuvres, like, 'Here's an appetizer, now go create the main course.'

"But the good thing was that HeadRush had just come out with the MX5 [guitar effects and amp modeller], and I was really excited about it. So with each song I made a new patch, as each song sounded, to me, different. For example, on the single that came out, *Tell Me Why*, you can tell it's a Tele. But on other tracks, I used my Black Beauty Les Paul. It was a varied approach."

Regardless of the record you're on, your modern-yet-vintage sound always bleeds through. What shapes your tone?

"It's a lot of stuff. But as I'm writing music, the HeadRush thing has become so important, you know? Especially during the pandemic – I'd write something and be like, 'Oh, this needs to be a Joe Perry thing,' or maybe I'd say, 'Ah, this sounds more like Randy Rhoads or Dave Murray.'

The luxury of the HeadRush is that it locks in vintage stuff, like a Soldano or so many different sounds for a rhythm track, for example. For me, my ears tell me what I want to hear. They tell my brain, 'This is what you need.' From there, it's about tweaking the EQ, gain, and finding what feels nice to me.

"There's a song on this album called *Medusa*, and I shaped my tone by picturing an old vintage amp with a lot of distortion – like an old Fender Bassman, with maybe a Tube Screamer, and kept nudging it from there. And then, for the rhythm track, I'll look for something like an old Marshall Plexi, add a little distortion, and play with it until it feels right but still has the listener thinking, 'Yeah, that sounds like what Tracii does.'"

Your solos are always very lyrical and seldom redundant. You seem like the type of player who would feel restricted sticking to typical eight-bar solos all the time.

"When stuff starts to get redundant, I usually start picking up the notes through the chords of the solo. So if there's eight bars, and there's a definite chord progression, and it starts sounding real jammy instead of lyrical, I'll play the notes of the chords and add until it begins to sound like its own little song. Then I can add licks to those chord changes, and suddenly, it sounds like a guitar solo."

LA Guns blazin': Tracii on stage in 2021 with Phil Lewis (left) on lead vocals

PHOTO BY JOE SCHAEFFER

Many people see solos as throwaway – how do you view the function of solos in your songs?

"Oh, it has to stand on its own. It can't just be a matter of, 'There's this space I've got to fill up with noise,' you know? Some things might call for that, but I've never approached it like that. I always try to get into that space and write something new, something clever. If I'm going to make noise, it'll have a purpose. I don't like standing there for an extra five minutes and having it be lazy."

Most people consider you a 'Les Paul into a Marshall' guy, and that's true to a degree. What have you been using lately?

"I've been using the Park Little Head 18 lately, which is basically a 20-watt Marshall. I have another Park

PHOTO BY JOE SCHAEFFER

Little one that's like a Bluesbreaker combo but also like a JTM100 with lots of vintage distortion. While working on this record, and now that I'm working on the next LA Guns record, I've been messing around with that a lot. I got kinda stuck on that combo amp, and I've been going from my Tele and, of course, using different Les Pauls."

You love your Boss pedals, but what other pieces of kit are on your 'board these days?

"I'm using the HeadRush [MX5] a lot when I play live; I have a lot of cool shit programmed in there. I've got a gigantic stereo delay, a small stereo delay and a Tube Screamer, which I never really turn on because there's too much crazy feedback. I've always got a fuzz, which sounds a lot like the Boss. But I have a cool tape delay, and there's a chance I'll have an all-analogue setup when I get back on the road in August.

"But when I'm at home, I still love my Boss pedals. In the end, other stuff's cool, but I have difficulty tweaking things that sound a way I'm not used to. My range does not want to hear things it's not used to, so I use the Boss, especially the silver fuzz [FZ-5]. It's so in-your-face, not too bright, and I can really dial it in. I especially love the Waza Craft one [FZ-1W], but not the one that's like a Tone Bender."

Frontiers is having you work on a ton of collaborative projects of late. What's the secret sauce that keeps the Tracii Guns recorded tone in demand?

"I mean, I'd say it's because I'm a chameleon when it comes to doing these things. I guess my personality comes through no matter what style or who I'm working with. Plus, it makes them some bucks [laughs]. But, for me, it's really an outlet. The one thing that used to drive the guys in LA Guns crazy is that I'd be doing all these side projects and make all these bands, and it would interfere.

"So doing projects like this thing with Jack [Russell], or the thing with Todd Kerns, it's a much better outlet than making a whole new fucking band! I'm never gonna tour with any of these other guys; none of that is ever gonna happen. It's a safe zone. I get to be creative, people like it, and it sells a lot of gear [laughs]. It's like this interview now – people wonder what I used on a song, and maybe they'll want it themselves. Like, 'Oh, what pedal was that?'"

Guns: "I guess my personality comes through no matter what style or who I'm working with"

You're much more of a guitar nerd than people realise, aren't you?

"Oh, yeah. I get to be a little part of the guitar-nerd community, which is cool because I'm not really known for being a guitar nerd. But obviously, I am one. And on a selfish level, it's great for me. I'm like the guitar nerd who is old [laughs]. People come to me and say, 'Hey, man, what's this or that?' because I've used it all like 20 years ago."

You're pretty tuned into the sights and sounds of the guitar community. Is it in a healthy place?

"As far as what's happening online, I gotta say, there's people like Grace Bowers and Sam Bam Koltun who have swagger and are blowing minds. That's what I look for. I look for players with personality and who really understand the emotion of playing heavy rock guitar as opposed to just, 'Oh, look how fucking fast I can play.' I look for musicians who play live a lot and aren't just farming followers on Instagram.

"As time has gone on, it's become more about getting likes and recognition on social media – and what's getting lost in translation is the personality of the songwriting and performing in front of people. That's what makes you special. Art is about the identity of the creator. I relate to the ones who go out and tour; I love the lifestyle, you know?"

"The lifestyle of someone sitting at an Ikea computer desk, shredding guitar, day after day– I don't want any part of that lifestyle..."

There's certainly a romance to that as far as guitar goes!

"The lifestyle of someone sitting at an Ikea computer desk, shredding guitar, day after day, like, I don't want any part of that lifestyle. I want to be part of a lifestyle where it's like, 'Hey, I didn't sleep, and I missed these three notes because I couldn't get in the shower at the truck stop, and some toothless woman was trying to pickpocket me.' That creates character. Sitting in your safe zone, going over scales and modes repeatedly to get attention, man, what does it lead to? Where does it get you? It'd rather look at a player and say, 'They're a bad motherfucker, they're gonna be around forever.' That's how I feel about players like Grace and Sam; they have personality, vibe, swagger tone, and dexterity. They do their thing." **[AD]**

Medusa by Russell/Guns is available now on Frontiers Music SRL

www.facebook.com/traciiguns

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Pedal Poseur

Neville Marten asks why it's fine to play multi-thousand pound guitars through multi-thousand pound amps but a snazzy 'board feels too showy

It's true. I've always aspired to lovely guitars and have owned quite a few – vintage and new – from all the best makers. Amps, too, have been a thing with me since I bought a giant Fender Dual Showman 2x15 stack when I was just 22, nabbed one of the first Boogies in the country a few years later, and graduated in 1994 to a Matchless DC30 that was used by Hank Marvin on kids' TV (in an all-star line-up alongside Suzi Quatro on bass). I know this because when I bought it from Mansons Guitar Shop in Exeter they gave me a VHS video of said performance, clearly showing Hank playing through the green combo they'd loaned him for the event. And which was now mine.

"When Dan Steinhardt built me a pedalboard (the double-decker type that would pass for SpaceX's mission control), it felt too ostentatious"

But when Dan Steinhardt built me a very grand pedalboard a couple of years ago (you know, the double-decker type that would pass for SpaceX's mission control), it always felt too ostentatious for me. People would make 'ooh' and 'aah' type comments, ask me about all the pedals (and I'm not buff when it comes to such things), then expect me to play like Guthrie Govan. And that was never going to happen.

I plucked up the courage, and asked Dan if he could streamline my pedals onto a less showy single-deck board. He kindly agreed, but it wasn't ready for a gig that required a basic old-fashioned rig, and Mick Taylor had already pulled my old unit to bits, ready for the new build. So Mick asked me over and set about putting an emergency board together that would get me by. I needed a tuner, an overdrive, boost, delay and chorus, and this was duly rigged up onto a single-row layout on a D'Addario extendable board.

The gig in question was a charity bash for my old friend Robbie Gladwell, himself a great guitarist, and with our mutual friend Steve Laney also on six-string. They were the main event and had most of the guitar parts sorted. I was the filler in between.

Steve was going to play one of his many party pieces, the awesome Tommy Emmanuel version of Les Paul and Mary Ford's *Bye Bye Blues*, as also covered by Jeff Beck and Imelda May, with rockabilly legend Darrell Higham on second guitar. I got to the theatre first and set up my titchy single-strip board, planted my Les Paul on its stand and waited for the others to arrive.

Jaws On The Floor!

Robbie's pedal setup turned out to be a little more extensive than mine, but not by much. However, when Steve pulled out this thing that must've been five feet long and two feet deep, containing every possible drive, delay, modulation, volume, wah, MIDI switcher, and whatever else one can think of, it put us both to shame.

He was totally pragmatic about it, though, saying he was fed up with having different pedals on different boards for different occasions, so 'rationalised' them all onto this one humongous unit. It wasn't about being flash, just sensible. Plus... he's a total monster of a player, and when he blasted through the Tommy tune on his Suhr T-style guitar (with fabulous delays and reverbs, of course), Robbie and I just stood there open-mouthed. I think you need to be that good in order to carry off a contraption as impressive as that. And Steve's definitely that good. He didn't use many of his pedals that night, but knew they were there if he needed them.

I can't wait for my new pedal setup with GigRig switching. But my little board acquitted itself more than adequately that night (thanks, Mick), through Robbie's loaned Fender Deluxe Reverb Tone Master, so I was well chuffed. Look Steve Laney up on YouTube if you want to witness a fantastic guitarist in action. See you next time.

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Expandable, not expendable

What? D'Addario XPND 2 Pedalboard **Where seen?** www.pmtonline.co.uk **Price?** £140

This is the larger version of the board that Mick Taylor rigged up for my gig, and which will probably house my new setup. All the online reviews are great and, as with so many D'Addario accessories, it's a clever, no-nonsense design, is built like a tank, and does exactly what you want it to do. Built from extruded aluminium, it's a four-rail design and a second section slides out and locks to whatever length you require. It's ready covered in Velcro, and there's plenty of room underneath to hide power supplies, excess cable and the like. A carry bag will cost another £100 or so – not the most affordable option around, but quality never comes cheap!

The D'Addario XPND 2: well-built convenience with a price tag to match

PHOTO COURTESY OF WWW.DADDARIO.COM

Comfort Zone

Alex Bishop discovers that 'less' turns out to be 'more' when it comes to making a comfort arm bevel

For me, making bespoke acoustic guitars is all about crafting a unique instrument that looks as special as it sounds. But how exactly is this achieved? Every maker has their own style; just like the brushstrokes of an artist, every pass of a luthier's chisel carries the identity of its maker. But sometimes we have to look for other ways to stand out from the crowd.

Back in 1989, William 'Grit' Laskin was the first builder to introduce the concept of an arm bevel to an acoustic guitar. This feature was designed to alleviate the pressure on the picking arm by breaking up the corner of the instrument with a deep chamfer. Soon after, luthier Kevin Ryan developed this idea into the 'transitional' bevel, a similar idea that sees the binding blend away into the body of the guitar to create a similar effect.

When I was approached last year to build a guitar, the client challenged me to do something to improve the ergonomics of the traditional acoustic guitar. It seemed a fitting opportunity to try out one of these styles of bevel and embrace learning a new process. I had actually attempted the arm bevel a couple of times before but with mixed results. My first try relied on a curved block of maple forming the junction between the top and side at the lower bout. By filing away this section of the guitar when the body was finished, the figured maple would become exposed and the corner of the guitar would get blended away.

Around The Bend

It all seemed to go well up to this point, but what I didn't count on was the challenge posed when I got to adding a decorative binding to the outside corners of the body. How was this binding going to curve around the outline of the guitar and yet flow up and down the bevel at the same time? I looked again at my reference pictures. Some kind of guitar-making sorcery was at play here. Further research was needed!

With the help of esteemed luthier Kent 'Carlos' Everett (thank you!), I learned that the curve of the bevel had to be cut into the rib and the top *before* the internal block went in. Not only that but a decorative veneer would be glued over the top so the internal block could be made of any wood. This meant that, rather than using a rock hard piece of lumber like bird's eye maple, I could opt for something lightweight and easy to carve such as lime or spruce.

The block itself would have to be tapered at each end and undercut to reduce weight. Not an easy task with such an awkward, curve-shaped piece of wood. The resulting artefact was rather like a wooden banana, and in more ways than one. I'm sure any woodworker out there would agree that trying to create perfect joinery becomes quite the challenge when your workpiece is

> "How was this binding going to curve around the outline of the guitar, and yet flow up and down the bevel at the same time?"

sliding out from under the clamps like a banana peel under the sole of a shoe.

But armed with the right approach, I could see things were beginning to head in the right direction. Once the soundbox was closed, it was clear how the binding would seamlessly flow around the arm bevel in one continuous unbroken line, and it would just take a bit of ingenuity to work out how the purfling lines would be held in place where they diverted away from the binding at either end of the bevel. Fortunately, I'd recently seen a clever trick somewhere online using scalpel blades inserted into the bevel block to wedge the purfling firmly against the outline of the guitar. With a bit of reinforced tape added for good measure – and despite the array of blades making it look like the final scene from a horror movie – everything was looking just right.

The finishing touch of the outer veneer was all that remained. Few sensory experiences match the satisfaction of trimming away the oversized veneer with a sharpened chisel to reveal the simple flowing lines of wood beneath. Crafted with precision and finesse, the arm bevel seamlessly blends form and function, offering both aesthetic elegance and enhanced comfort.

The sleek lines of Alex's bound arm bevel (far left) came to fruition with the help of a few dozen scalpel blades and copious amounts of supporting tape!

PHOTOS BY ALEX BISHOP

Gauge Against The Machine

Choosing strings can be a highly personal thing, as high-end string maker Curt Mangan explains to **Jamie Dickson**

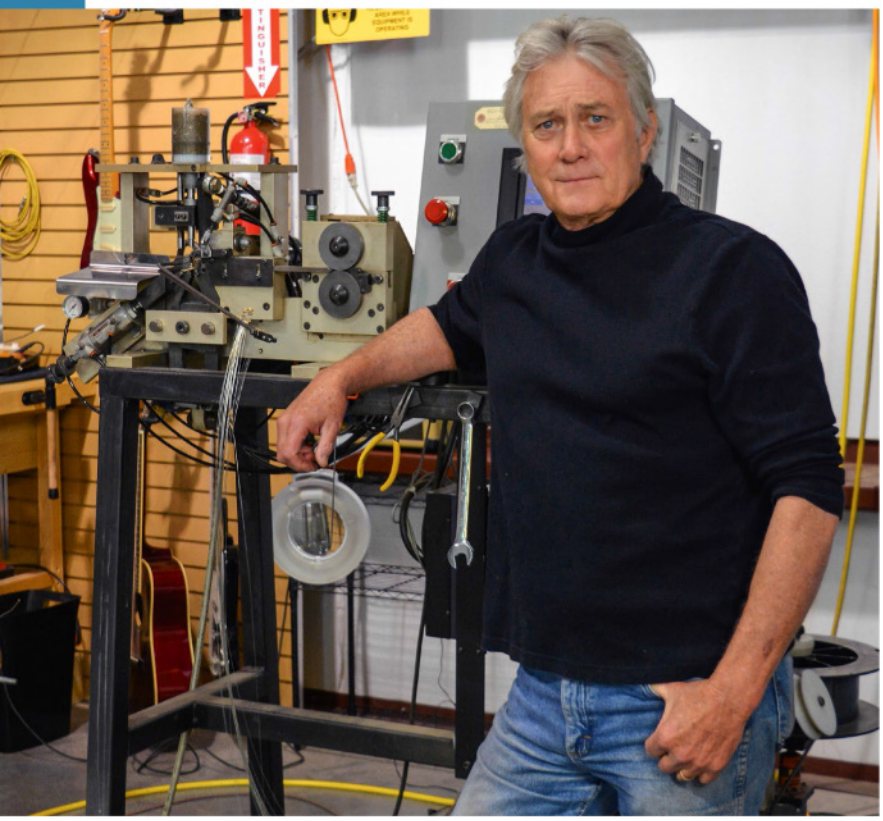
While many of us agonise at length about what the perfect set of pickups for our Strat or 335 might be, fewer devote the same amount of deliberation to strings. This is a bit unfair, I think, as not only do strings influence the tone of our guitars more than we give them credit for, but they're also our tactile interface with the instrument.

Looked at that way, we should be treating them like tone-making royalty and, crucially, trying out different makes, types and gauges of string – not so we can select one and have done with it for the rest of our lives, but to find the set that best fits each guitar we own. At the very least, we owe it to ourselves to find strings that work for who we are as players, says veteran string-maker Curt Mangan, who produces some of the best strings made today, from his workshop in Cortez, Colorado.

"First off, every player is unique in how they will make a string vibrate," Curt observes. "Their 'attack' has a huge effect on the resulting tone both electric and acoustic. The old saying, 'It's all in the fingers' is, in my opinion, 100 per cent correct. I was once in a room with three well-known guitarists all playing the same guitar through the same amp. The differences in the tonal responses from each player were remarkable.

PHOTO BY CURT MANGAN

Colorado-based string maker Curt Mangan highlights the importance of the core-to-wrap ratio in determining the performance of strings



"So, there is no right or wrong choice in the strings a player selects," he continues. "They must find strings that match the tone and feel they want. There is no one-size-fits-all. But the good news is, today, players have thousands of choices. The player will know what it is they are searching for when they feel and hear it. But it can take some time."

While there is tremendous diversity in the feel and sound of strings on the market today, basic physics means they tend to be designed on broadly similar lines. Therefore the features that *can* be finessed and tweaked by string makers assume greater importance.

Get To The Core

"Due to some laws of nature, there are rules that all string manufacturers must follow otherwise the strings will not work. So, in many ways, strings will need to be more alike than different, but there are differences," Curt explains. "All metal guitar strings, both electric and acoustic, use 'music wire' for the plain strings and the core wires [of the wound strings]. It is a spring wire and the most common and popular is tin-plated, high-carbon steel. The wire is available in many shapes, but the most common is round and hex. Round wire is used for plain strings and core wire. Hex is only used for [the core of some types of] wound strings."

And here lies an interesting design choice many players are unaware of: experimenting with the relative thickness of wrap wire and the core wire beneath, yields big differences in the performance of the string – something that many string-makers exploit to develop strings that work in different specialist applications.

"The biggest difference in strings is what metal or metals (alloy) that the cover (wrap) wire is made of and the core-to-wrap ratio. There are several ways to make a 0.054-inch diameter string," Curt says. "You can use a thinner core wire with a larger cover wire or a larger core wire and a smaller cover wire, but both strings will still measure .054.

"The core-to-wrap ratio affects the feel and tone of the string. A string with a thinner core wire can feel a little easier to bend and have slightly more high-end harmonic nuance, but might require the player to have a lighter, less forceful picking action to avoid buzzes and a rubber-band effect. A heavier core wire has a little more tension allowing a player to be more aggressive, but if the core wire gets too large you can lose some high-end harmonic nuances.

"Cover-wire alloys, meanwhile, greatly affect the tone of the string," Curt continues. "For electric guitars, nickel-plated steel (NPS) remains the most popular. It has balanced highs, mids and lows, plus more steel for magnetic pickups. NPS strings are good for any style of music. Pure nickel is very similar to nickel-plated steel but

PHOTO BY CURT MANGAN

has a little more warmth. Many blues players prefer pure nickel and [these types of strings] are good for guitars that are too bright."

Moving over to the world of acoustic guitar strings, the overall gauge of the set used arguably has even more of a crucial impact on tone and playability than it does for electric guitars.

"In the old days, most [acoustic] guitars were shipped with 13-56 medium-gauge strings. And yes, some guitars didn't do well with the stress and some did just fine. Today, we have a lot of choice and unless the manufacturer doesn't recommend medium-gauge 13 to 56 strings, you're probably safe to use them. What's more important is the player finding the gauges and alloy that fits their unique playing style and best enhances the natural tone of the guitar," Curt says.

The ubiquitous 12-54 set is typically a great 'middle ground' choice for acoustics in terms of gauge, but going down a gauge can open up the sound of some guitars even though this may seem counterintuitive

The overall gauge of an acoustic set of strings arguably has even more of an impact on tone and playability than it does for electric guitars

One big factor in what string-gauge range will work best on your acoustic is the instrument's scale length. Curt says: "Players also need to keep in mind that 25.5-inch scale length guitars [as used on many Martin-style designs] will have more tension than 24.75-inch scale length guitars [as used on many Gibson-style designs]. This is why we see an abundance of 11- to 52-gauge sets being used on 25.5-inch scale guitars and 12- to 53- and 12- to 54-gauge sets used on 24.75-inch scale guitars."

That being said, it's also worth adding that going up to a heavier gauge on your acoustic doesn't necessarily mean a meatier bigger sound, adds Damian Ford, who works closely with Curt Mangan to bring the company's premium strings to the UK market.

"A great example is that on my Martin 000-28," Damian says. "I used 12 to 54s for the longest time, but then thought I'd like to drop down a gauge to 11 to 52s to see how they felt – and, my goodness, it completely opened up the sound of the guitar, which I wasn't expecting! Plus they were easier to play, so that was a bonus. Sometimes the guitar will tell you what it likes the best. Each piece of wood is different, in the same way that each of us is different. So there are no wrong answers – have fun experimenting!" he concludes.

THREE TO GET READY

Innovative, premium electric strings

Curt Mangan Nickel Wound 9.5-44 £10.99

The 'in-between' gauge of 9.5 to 44 is, arguably, the 'Goldilocks' option between the extra tonal heft of 10s and the slinkiness of 9s and works well on Fenders with their 25.5-inch scale. Curt Mangan's Fusion Matched Nickel Wound set is one of the nicest-feeling and most toneful on the market.

D'Addario XS Super Light Plus 9.5-44 £17.99

Another 'in-between' 9.5 to 44 set from the biggest name in strings. Much R&D has produced a coated set that protects the wound strings with an 'ultra-thin film' to reduce corrosion, and coats the plain strings in 'a unique polymer treatment'. Expect a silky feel and long-lasting, top-notch tone.

Rotosound Ultramag Superlight 9-42 £14.95

Revered British string maker Rotosound has taken a different approach to string performance with its premium Ultramag set, which uses a unique alloy of 52 per cent nickel and 48 per cent iron to really drive magnetic pickups, offering extra "power, sustain and string life". Well worth a try.

AUDIO ▶ http://bit.ly/guitaristextra

Playing With Dissonance

Richard Barrett explains how dissonance within a chord can often be offset when careful attention is paid to the voicing...

The term 'light and shade' might be well used, but it does describe some very important qualities in music. For example, the 'tension and release' of Dsus4 to D major, or even a V-I progression such as C7 to F. Taking this concept a bit further, film score and classical composers often use dissonance, tension and release to build and resolve suspense. Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No 5* is a masterclass in this.

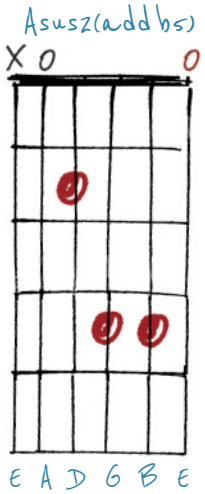
However, the examples here focus on using dissonance within a single chord and how sometimes the rest of the chord can balance it out, forming a kind of resolution in itself. For example, a major 7th interval (the root and 7th of a major scale played simultaneously) can sound pretty jarring in isolation, but as part of a major 7th chord this dissonance becomes an attractive feature. Perhaps even more challenging is the minor 2nd (two notes a semitone apart), but if we arrange this within a minor 9th chord, this is a different story. G

PHOTO BY MAURICE SUMMERS/GUITAR PLAYER MAGAZINE

Distinctly dissonant: Andy Summers of The Police

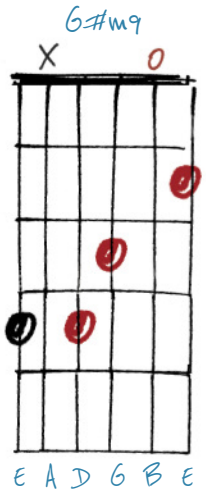
Example 1

This Asus2(add♭5) piles on the suspense in two ways: the suspended 2nd (B) played on the third string, then the ♭5 (E♭) played on the second. Note the minor 2nd between E♭ and E on the first and second strings. This resolves nicely to a regular A chord at the 2nd fret.



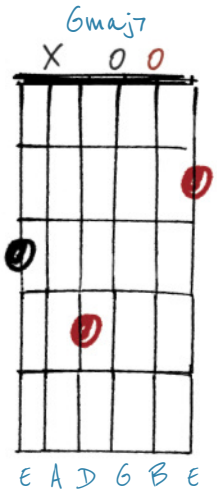
Example 2

For this voicing of G#m9, it's important not to let the fifth string ring, but it's easy to mute this with the pad of the third finger of your fretting hand. You'll find the 9th (A#) adjacent to the minor 3rd (B) on the open second string, a minor 2nd away. Jarring in isolation but a different matter within the chord.



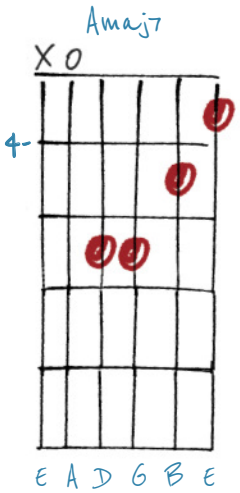
Example 3

Using a similar approach to Example 2, this Gmaj7 puts the major 7th (F#) adjacent to the root (G) on the open third string. Often, major 7th chords keep the major 7th well away from the root (seven notes away, in fact!), but as you can hear, this can work very well.



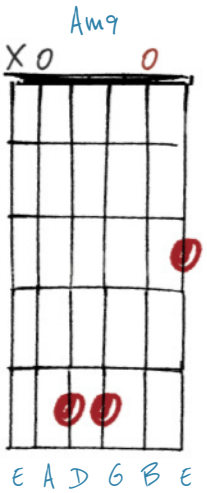
Example 4

This Amaj7 is more conventional in that it keeps the root and major 7th in their order of appearance in the scale with the root on the open fifth string and major 7th on the 6th fret of the fourth string and 4th fret, top string respectively. However, playing these two notes in isolation is still very dissonant – much nicer within the chord!



Example 5

This Am9 is missing its 5th (E) but does feature the 9th (B) on the open second string, adjacent to the minor 3rd (C) at the 5th fret of the third string. Once again, the interval alone would not necessarily inspire (unless you're looking to unsettle people!), but it forms an essential part of the chord.



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STAR LETTER

EYES WIDE SHUT

Eric Clapton: Keeping eyes closed can open up playing

PHOTO BY TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

I wanted to share a recent experience, which may help other readers. I was getting in a rut jamming along with songs and coming up with my own solos, it was then that I realised I was looking at the fretboard and going to my 'safe areas' with the same old string bends, hammering on, etc. So I tried with my eyes closed and, after a few missed notes, I suddenly started playing different stuff and in ways that were beyond my musical pay grade/ability. I was moving up the neck and, amazingly, getting the right notes!

I've always admired seeing pros playing with their eyes shut but never expected I could do it. I then tried using some trem and found I was in Alan Murphy territory. It was like taking the stabilisers off your first bike and then going off-road into a forest! I can only encourage people to give it a try for a few weeks – you will be amazed at how your brain gives you some kind of 'sight' of where you are on the fretboard. You will play new and different stuff that you would not have done with your eyes open, staying in the bike lane following all the road signs that keep you safe but boring, musically speaking.

I am not a high-level player with deep music theory or anything like that, so don't think you have to be to achieve this. You will soar higher and better than ever before in your playing.

Trevor Garland

Thanks for your tip Trevor – it's a good one. We often shut our eyes when we try to recall something, as closing off one sense often heightens the others. It could be argued that when we shut our eyes we are simply directing attention to what we should have in focus all along – sound and its relation to what our fingers are doing.

We also let go of the visual cues that help us navigate the fretboard, in one way, but possibly inhibit us from going where our ears think makes the most sense. We revert to established patterns such as minor pentatonic positions because they offer us the security of knowing we aren't going to play the 'wrong' note – but how often do these aids to navigation become fences we don't want to cross, that prevent us from playing more freely, up and down the neck? And since Trevor's advice – which is used by many professional players – costs absolutely nothing to try out, why not give it a try today?

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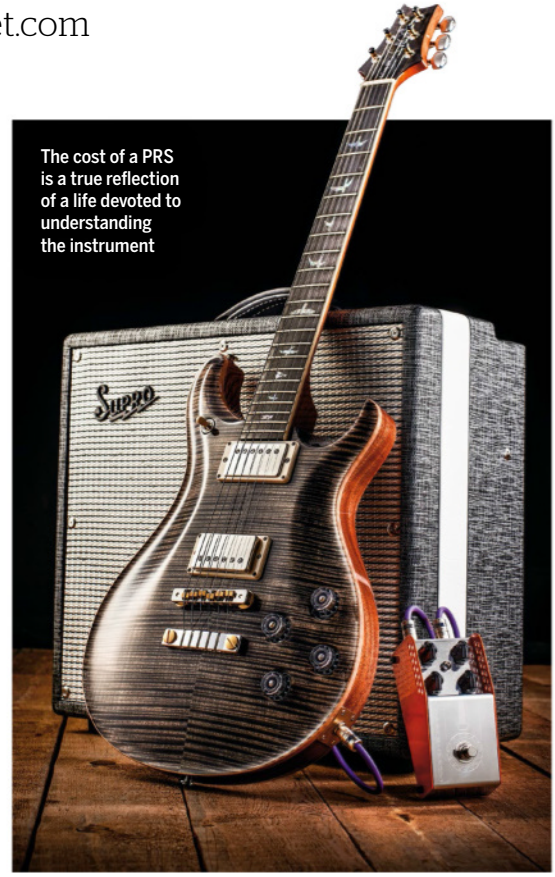

The cost of a PRS is a true reflection of a life devoted to understanding the instrument

MONEY FOR NOTHING?

Everybody has their pros and cons with guitar brands but when it comes to a PRS everybody says the same thing: it's got something about it that players feel sets it apart from the rest.

I describe my McCarty as knowing what I'm playing; I swear it produces its own notes! When they burst on the scene I saw them as pretty, bejewelled copies, where the prices for two identical models varied a lot if one had a whale-blue quilted top. Now I consider established major brands as Cro-Magnon in their approach. I sold my Les Paul Standard and got a Burny RLC-60. The Japanese quality kills the USA stuff, 70s era anyway. And Strats? My Highway One plays very similarly to a Malmsteen Strat but it costs almost $2K less! Is Ferrari taking a cut? The bargain of the last 20 years is still the Wolfgang Special. Same gear as a US San Dimas plus Sperzels, a carve, D-Tuna and a simplified trem spring arrangement.

Tony Wilson

Thanks Tony, time and experience does have a way of changing our perceptions of brands. Sometimes we want to own guitars because they're what our heroes played. Nothing wrong with that but, as time goes on, and we come to

understand our own playing style and musical needs better, it's normal to find we gravitate more towards 'what works' for us, as much as we do towards the icons of our musical upbringing. We've found that process means reassessing not only affordable guitars you might once have labelled as 'not as good' but also high-end guitars you might have dismissed as 'only for cork-sniffers'.

Guitar designers such as Paul Reed Smith have pretty much devoted their life to improving the instruments they make, according to their evolving understanding of what a good guitar should be. It shouldn't be a surprise that the money the resulting guitars command isn't just for fancy bird inlays and a nice top.

Moving over to EVH, in highlighting the Wolfgang Special, you cite specific features it offers – it's a good point. Too often we forget guitars were once sold on their features, not their heritage or their brand cachet. If that adds up to a better guitar for your needs you did well to clock the extras. However, we would advise a careful look at the specs of guitars such as the Burny. Despite being quality guitars, they're often not quite the same spec as the guitars they're inspired by, which should come as no surprise, as they're considerably cheaper too. The RLC-60, for example, is Chinese-built and features a rosewood not ebony fretboard. If you're aware of details like that and you love the guitar for what it is, then great.

UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

I've been trying to source the provenance of a 335-type guitar I bought secondhand nearly 30 years ago. It says "Country" on the headstock, so looking up anything with 'Country' and 'Guitar' on the internet brings back lots of music-based results, but no manufacturers. The guitar's hardware is decent, including a trapeze tailpiece, and the quality stacks up against my budget Gretsch from 25 years ago. The PAF-type neck humbucker sounds nice and mellow.

Hopefully the photos will help, as I'm stumped – who made 'Country' guitars? I've never seen another in 40 years.

Leighton Bruce

Leighton Bruce's mystery Country guitar features good-quality hardware and plays as well as Leighton's Gretsch; however, its origins are unknown. Can you help?

Can any readers shed further light on the *terra incognita* of Leighton's 335-style Country electric? We'd love to know more ourselves! Write in with your insights and we'll print the best.

ARC OF A DIVER

In issue 510's *Neville's Advocate*, Neville has a rant about unbalanced guitars and neck dive. I wholeheartedly agree with him! He suggests extending the strap to the headstock using the old bootlace method, but I find this shifts the whole guitar relative to the body.

Reader Alan Dugdale's recent mystery-guitar discovery reveals itself to be a Harmony H66 Vibrajet

I now use a three-point attachment method on problem guitars (see picture below). I attach a loose line between the body-strap button and the headstock and attach the end of the strap to the point where the guitar balances. If the guitar dives, the strap moves towards the headstock and vice-versa. I leave enough length on the line so that it forms a shallow triangle with about a hand-width depth from the straight line. It looks a little odd, but doesn't get in the way. Most importantly, it enables me to perfectly balance any guitar without any major modifications – even SGs!

Nigel Williams

We salute your ingenuity Nigel – could we dub your invention the 'Williams Self-Balancing Neck-Plunge Harness'? Seriously, this is the kind of practical thinking we need more of – if any other readers have created smart inventions of a similar kind, send them in and we'll print the best.

The 'Williams Self-Balancing Neck-Plunge Harness' – coming to a problem guitar near you soon...

PERFECT HARMONY

Last year I visited a relative in Canada and leaning up in the corner of one of his rooms was an old Harmony guitar. He bought it in Leigh-on-Sea in Essex around 1967 or '68, just before he emigrated to Canada, and has been its only carer since he bought it. I took a load of photos and I have attached them here (see above). It's in lovely condition for its age – it's aged far better than I have!

We would like to find out more about its production, quantities made, history of the model and potential value but I have no idea where to go to find that out, I hope you can help with that. I'd love to see an article on it in your magazine if you're interested!

Alan Dugdale

Alan, we took a look at a 1965 Harmony catalogue (see www.vintageguitarandbass.com/harmony/catalogues) and the features of your relative's guitar – including the metal control plate – seem to exactly match the H66 Vibrajet 'with built-in tremolo, transistor' model. While not going into exhaustive detail, the catalogue lists the unique features of the guitar as 'Finger Lever For Tremolo Activation' as well as 'Tremolo Speed Control' and 'Tremolo Modulation or Depth Control'.

We'd love to know if the circuitry is still active – the catalogue reveals that the lowermost disc on the control plate is a 'cap, concealing small battery' so we wondered if you or your relative had taken it off and had a look? Either way, such guitars are becoming increasingly sought-after and decent examples can go for about £1,500 on Reverb and eBay – though your relative's guitar does seem to be in particularly nice condition, so who knows?

Send Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

WIN!

A Fender Vintera II '60s Stratocaster

Iconic in looks and feel, this Lake Placid Blue Strat could be yours!

Want to join in the Stratocaster's 70th birthday celebrations and win a fabulous Lake Placid Blue Vintera Strat while you're at it? It really couldn't be simpler. The Vintera II is kitted out with all the traditional features you would find on a 1960s Stratocaster – the synchronised trem, rosewood 'board, triple laminate scratchplate and three single-coil pickups. All the famous Strat tones are present and correct thanks to a five-way selector switch, so anything from SRV to Dire Straits will fall from your fingertips with effortless ease.

In order to win this fabulous instrument, provided by our friends at Fender (www.fender.com), all you need to do is answer the question below and then click the link (or scan the QR code above right), and follow the online instructions. Good luck!

A Stratocaster without a vibrato system is known as a...

A) *Hardtail*
B) *Stoptail*
C) *Dovetail*

CLOSING DATE 20 JUNE 2024

Make sure you enter before the closing date at

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GOOD LUCK!

Terms and conditions: By taking part you agree to be bound by these terms and the competition rules at https://www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/. The opening date for entries is 00:00 (UK Time) on 20 April 2024 and will close at 23:59 (UK Time) on 20 June 2024. The competition is free to enter and entries must be submitted via http://bit.ly/git511fender. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Entries are limited to one per individual. Open to all UK residents aged 18 and over, except employees of Future Publishing Limited ("Future"), Fender Musical Instruments Corporation ("Sponsor") and any party involved in the competition. There will be one winner entitled to the featured item provided by the Sponsor and selected at random. The winner will be randomly drawn from all valid entries received and shall be notified by Future by email or telephone within 14 days of the closing date. Upon notification the winners will be required to supply details of a UK delivery address. If a winner has not responded after two weeks of being notified that they are a winner, an alternative winner will be drawn. The prize is non-transferable and non-refundable. There is no cash alternative.

TOP40

When *Guitarist* began in 1984, it's doubtful the launch editors imagined readers would still be turning the pages well past the millennium. And yet here we are. Editor **Jamie Dickson** reflects, to paraphrase Pink Floyd, on all that is now, and all that is gone – and all that's to come...

This issue, *Guitarist* magazine turns 40. It's a milestone in a person's life, let alone a monthly magazine devoted to oddly engaging chunks of wood and metal and the people who play them. But, such is the nature of guitar that a lot can change even while the things we love about it remain constant. The first copy of the magazine I ever bought was the July 1992 issue, with Slash on the front cover. The mag had been in print for just eight years at that point, so I hope you'll forgive a little walk down memory lane with me now.

In my home town of Lowestoft there was one decent music shop, Morlings, which sold household appliances on the ground floor and guitars (plus sheet music, keyboards and things) upstairs. Back then the internet was in its infancy and certainly wasn't a part of most people's daily lives. So if you wanted a guitar you went to a shop that sold them. A visit to Morlings left a powerful impression on the wide-eyed beginner that I was then – even the smell of a guitar shop seemed magical: a unique fragrance of waxes and wood-scents and warm electronic circuits that I can still recall to mind today. If you looked around the store, back then, you'd see a family of Red Knob Fender combos, from a hulking Twin down to a little Champ, proudly on show beside a display stand showing off the jagged lines of the then-new Heartfield Talon range of electric guitars – Fender's answer to the Ibanez RG series.

Meanwhile, on the wall, there was a custard-yellow '52 Tele reissue (they still had a way to go to get the details right back then) and, holy of holies, an Eric Clapton Strat in Pewter Grey Metallic finish with Gold Lace Sensor pickups, the most expensive guitar in the shop at the time.

If memory serves, its price tag was around the £700 mark, an astronomical sum that my 16-year-old brain couldn't imagine ever being able to afford. Atop the sales desk was a tray with a perspex cover, beneath which were lots of little compartments holding a colourful assortment of plectrums – and it was with one or two of these consolation prizes that I'd usually leave the shop after an hour's gawping at all the guitars I couldn't afford. I can remember turning the plecs over in my hands as I rummaged through the box – from the talc-dry surface of the Tortex pics to the cool curves of the Sharkfin plecs and the little Jazz picks, which looked like a petrified teardrop. I loved them all and no sweetshop pick 'n' mix could ever have come close in allure.

> *"Back in the day, it was normal to have just one guitar. You used it for everything from pub gigs to recording"*

Reading this, perhaps a few readers of a similar age may be nodding along and picturing similar hometown guitar shops from their own formative years. It still seems exciting, in memory, even now. That original passion for guitar has stayed with me, as I'm sure it has for most of us, but the landscape of guitar has changed immensely. So, on the occasion of our 40th anniversary, the team here at *Guitarist* conducted a survey about how we all play and enjoy guitar today, in 2024, and the results are now in. I hope you'll find it as interesting as we did to explore the results and that doing so is a fitting way to mark our fourth decade serving you, our readers, as you pursue your interest in guitar.

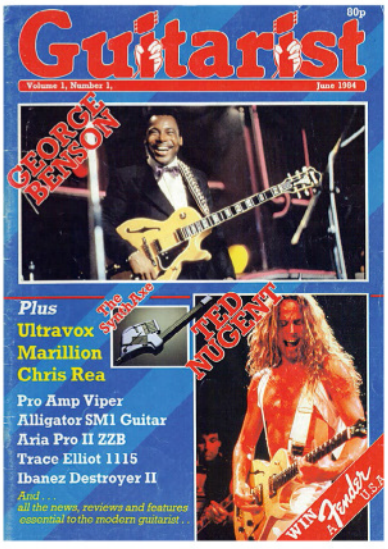
Going For A Song

Perhaps the obvious place to start is where we buy our guitars these days. Unsurprisingly, it's no longer inevitable that we'll visit a physical store – though it is, at least, still an important option. When we asked the question: 'By what method do you buy most of your gear now?', 63 per cent of survey respondents replied: 'Online'. However, a respectable 31 per cent said they still bought most of their gear 'In person, at point of sale'.

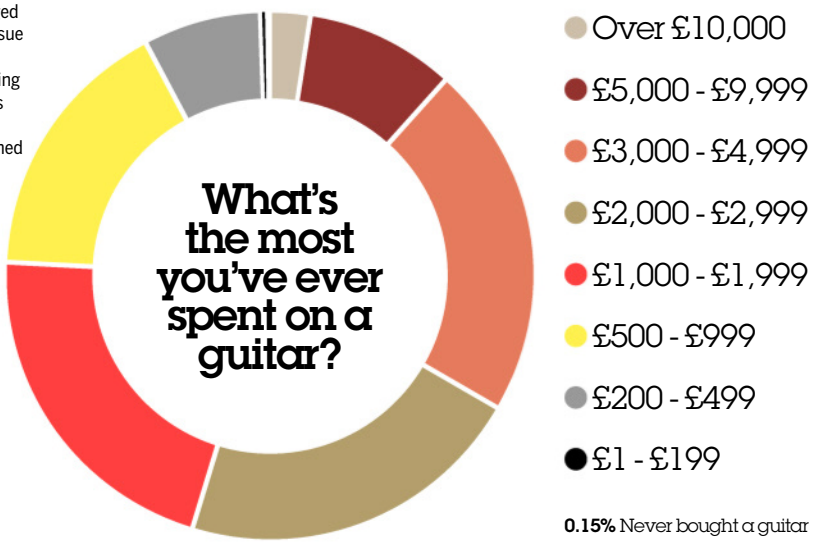
Of course, it's worth remembering that nearly all major stores that sell guitars from bricks-and-mortar premises also sell their products online – Anderton's comes to mind but GAK, Coda Music and many others all do this highly professionally – so those figures aren't necessarily bad news for stores that have the wherewithal to sell guitars both ways effectively.

One positive is that we're no longer limited to the selection on offer in our local area but can buy guitars from anywhere in the world, essentially. All the same, it does make one a little wistful for the days when you could soak up the atmosphere of a guitar shop every time you wanted to buy a new instrument – it was a special feeling then and remains so today.

Back in the day, as some readers have observed in our Feedback pages, it was normal to have just one guitar. You saved up for it then used it for everything from pub gigs to recording. At a pinch you might get a cheaper electric as a backup – I remember



Much has changed since our first issue (left), including buying and gigging habits, as well as the number of instruments owned by readers...



0.15% Never bought a guitar

adopting such an arrangement with a Gibson Nighthawk and a serviceable but much cheaper Squier Affinity Strat back in my college days, when I was in a boisterous ska band and strings broke every gig. But time and experience (and maybe a little more disposable cash) do tend to make guitar collections swell a bit, to say the least. All the same, we were surprised to learn that a whopping 42 per cent of survey respondents now own '10 or more guitars' while, in second place, a hefty 38 per cent 'fessed up to owning '5 to 9 guitars'.

We sense that the sales skills required to explain all this to their nearest and dearest must be at least as good as those whose job it is to sell the guitars! But what of the player we once were, with one guitar for all gigs? Well, just 1.5 per cent said they owned a single guitar today – while a mere 5 per cent said they had two.

"For many, the goal of learning new guitar skills is self-development and recreation rather than public performance"

Interestingly, when the same respondents were asked how many guitars they owned 10 years ago, only 27 per cent said '10 or more' and just 26 per cent said '5 to 9' – much lower than the figures they reported for how many guitars they currently own. It's possible that the lockdown (which sparked a buying boom) may account for why, collectively, we now own more guitars than we did even 10 years ago. Or it may just be that as good-quality guitars get cheaper, we feel we can treat ourselves more often. Or maybe every year brings another guitar or two and we're all just terrible at the 'one in one out' policy. Either way, we're certainly not downsizing our collections much as time goes by.

Learning The Blues

But while we may have more access to great guitars, the survey also suggested the demands of modern life have left us feeling like we don't have enough bandwidth to enjoy our guitar collections – or progress as musicians – as much as we would like.

When asked, 'What are your biggest obstacles to improvement?' nearly 50 per cent responded: 'Not enough time', while 32 per cent cited: 'Keeping motivation high' as the major obstacle. Taken together, these results seem to describe tiredness and lack of free time as affecting the focus on playing, which is sad to read but, perhaps, a relatable state, including for many working parents.

It is perhaps just as well then that technology has stepped in to make playing and learning a bit easier than it used to be – some 59 per cent of us, for example, use free online videos to learn new techniques, though it's nice to see the second largest group among those surveyed is the 47 per cent who still turn to magazines to learn playing techniques. Note that respondents could tick multiple answers so the percentages indicate the general popularity of certain preferences relative to others rather than slices of a finite pie, so to speak.

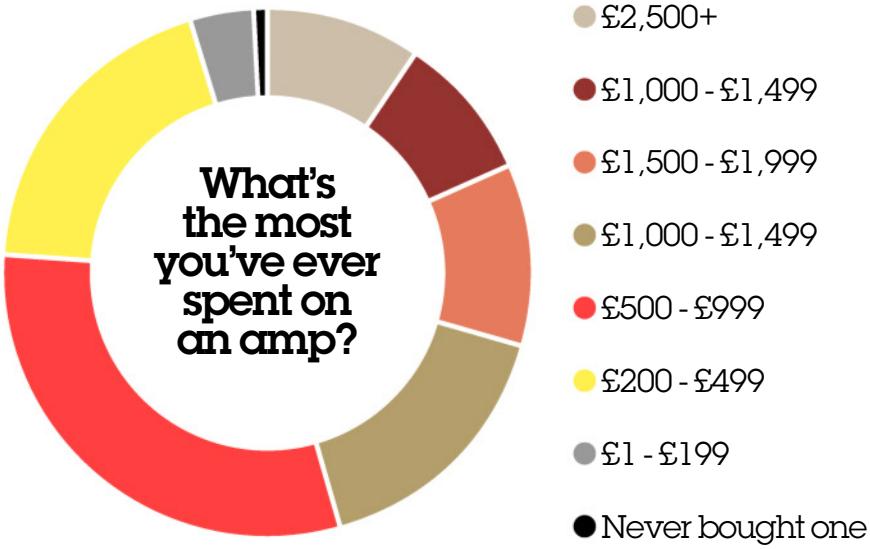
More interesting, perhaps is what the survey revealed about aspect of guitar playing the respondents would most like to be better at – around 22 per cent said soloing but, less predictably, they were just pipped to the top spot by the 23 per cent who named 'theory and fretboard knowledge' as top of their learning wishlist. Meanwhile, 'Repertoire/memorising songs' came in third after being chosen by 12 per cent of respondents.

Other parts of the survey suggested that, for many players, the goal of learning new guitar skills is self-development and recreation rather than public performance. For, while 41 per cent of respondents reported that they practised 'several times a week', only 8 per cent said they gigged every month. And while a healthy 30 per cent reported gigging a few times a year, 46 per cent played no gigs at all in an average year. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but such figures may explain why sales of 100-watt stacks ain't what they used to be, while small modelling amps are extremely popular. For example, Boss's Katana series of amps has grown in popularity to the point that Boss is now reportedly the second best-selling amp brand in the world. It's fair to say not many of us saw that coming.

In general, amps are the part of the guitar market that's transforming the fastest right now. Back in 1984, when the mag launched, your only choices were valve or solid state, with the valve option being the most popular when it came to pro-spec amps. Today, however, the convenience and effectiveness of digital modelling technology has eaten into valve's dominance. To be fair, when asked, 'What kind of amp do you play most regularly?' nearly 48 per cent of respondents still named valve amps as their primary means of getting loud.

But modelling amps proved popular too, garnering second place with 32 per cent of the vote – while the apparently deathless transistor amp took 15 per cent of the

Despite a notable rise in gear purchases, nearly half the readers who responded said that a lack of time to play and practise is an overwhelming factor in their lives



pie, with pedal-based solutions and apps scooping up the remainder.

Perhaps some of the appeal of modelling amps can be ascribed to their affordability, however – for while 21 per cent of respondents admitted the most they'd spent on an electric guitar was '£3,000–4,999', only 9 per cent of players said they'd spent more than £2.5k on an amp purchase. In fact, when asked: 'What's the most you've ever spent on an amp?', around 30 per cent of respondents said '£500–999,' while the second largest group – 19 per cent – was those who had spent a maximum of '£200–499' on a single amp purchase.

It seems that while we are happy to save our pennies for a really special guitar, most of us look upon amps as more of a value-for-money utility – which is kind of a shame, as a really good amp will do so much for your sound and they can be things of joy, well worth investing in. That's not to say you can't get good amps for under a grand, of course, but it's illuminating to see where most players' spending priorities lie when it comes to guitars vs amps.

Tech Is Not A Four-Letter Word

One of the more surprising findings of the survey was how positive most of us are about new developments in guitar technology. While guitarists are often accused of being stuck in the past, the survey reflected a more balanced view among respondents. When asked: 'What statement best describes how you feel about innovation in guitar gear', a healthy 38 per cent of respondents opted for: 'I love innovation in guitars, amps and effects'. Meanwhile, a more moderate (but still open-minded) majority of 51 per cent identified with the statement: 'Now and then an innovation grabs my imagination'. Lastly, 11 per cent backed the statement: 'I'm a traditionalist. They got it right in the 1950s.' That's good news not only for gear makers but for guitar music in general – because if an art isn't evolving it's dying.

Likewise, while we all have a bit of a soft spot for classic gear, when asked: 'How highly do you rate vintage (pre-1980) guitars?', the overwhelming majority of respondents chose a sensible middle ground, with 67 per cent identifying most with the statement: 'Vintage guitars can be wonderful, but the look, sound and quality of new guitars is just as good'. The next biggest group, representing 18 per cent of respondents, were the committed vintage enthusiasts who identified most with the following statement: 'In general I prefer the look, sound and quality of vintage guitars to new guitars'. However, the vintage sceptics, who represented just 11 per cent of respondents, put their tick beside this statement: 'Vintage guitars are mostly overrated and the look, sound and quality of new guitars is better'.

A Kind Of Magic

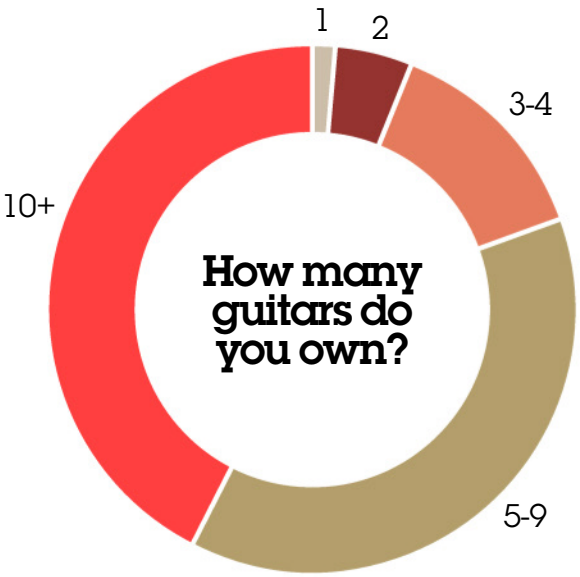
Although our survey delved into other matters, including music styles and practice routines, we'll leave that for another time perhaps. For now, I hope you've enjoyed this little walk through the tastes and preferences of *Guitarist* readers today, 40 years after we launched.

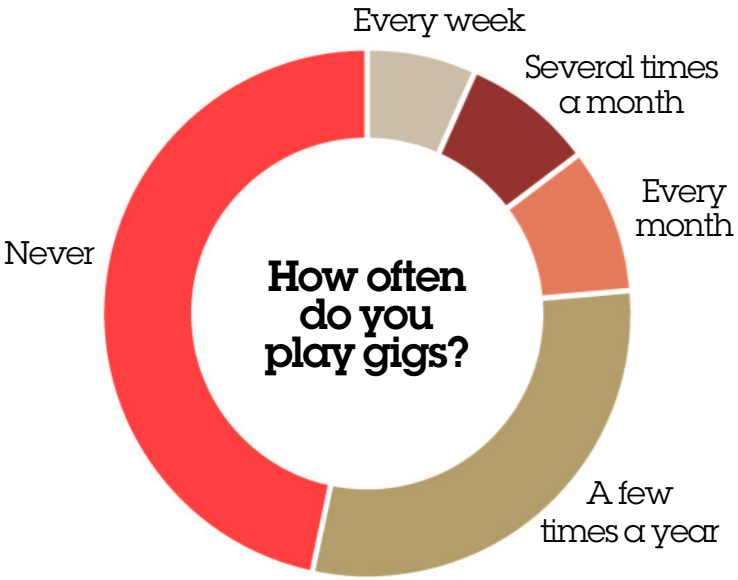
What emerges is a picture that perhaps we all instinctively recognise from our own experience today. Guitars are more present in our lives than ever before – but we have less time to enjoy them. Increasingly, we make and enjoy our music at home and the kind of gear we buy tends to reflect that. And while there's no sin in that and a lot of practical sense, I'd like to add the one thing I guarantee no player will regret doing more often is playing live – even if it's just once in a blue moon. It can be daunting but it is the soul of what we enjoy most about guitar – it's exciting, it joins us with other guitar lovers as no other experience can.

It doesn't have to be playing Wembley either... This writer stepped out onto the streets of his town to try busking for the first time recently and loved it. Yes, it's great when someone throws a coin into the guitar case but it's just as nice when a stranger says 'thanks' as they pass. Music transforms from something great to something approaching magic when we share it.

> *"No player will regret playing live – it can be daunting but it's the soul of what we enjoy most about guitar"*

Finally, a word about the one, essential constant, without which we wouldn't be here – the best thing of all, in fact, to happen to *Guitarist* in the past four decades. And that's you, dear reader. Staffers come and go, but the reason the magazine has kept on being able to talk about guitars and the people who play them – and will continue to do so – is because of your support. On behalf of the *Guitarist* team and all those who have sat in these chairs before us, all the way back to 1984, I want to extend the warmest and most profound thanks. Here's to four decades of guitar in the best possible company. Cheers and many happy returns!





MDOU MOCTAR

As the Niger guitarist releases a bristling new collection of protest songs, he tells *Guitarist* about injustice, the fire in his fingers, and why he comes alive on the stage

Words Henry Yates

Back in the 60s, the template for a protest singer was set as an earnest fingerstyle folkie, regaling a cross-legged audience in a Greenwich Village coffee house. 5,000 miles away, and a half-century later, Mdou Moctar didn't get the memo (in fact, as the African guitarist tells us today, almost no Western media whatsoever made it to his childhood city of Arlit, Niger). As such, seventh album, *Funeral For Justice*, finds him chronicling the travails of his devastated nation with a fiery, feedback-soaked Stratocaster, revving up the musical traditions of his Tuareg ancestry and, critically, making audiences dance like there's no tomorrow...

Told through a French translator, his backstory takes some beating. Having built his first guitar from stray wood, bicycle brake-cables and tuners fashioned from the keys for opening sardine tins, Moctar shrugged off the disapproval of his Muslim parents ("They thought I would drink alcohol or take drugs") to perform at local weddings. But it was 2008's debut album, *Anar*, that changed his trajectory, its songs proliferated via Africa's cellphone music-trading networks, and later included on an influential compilation by Oregon-based record label Sahel Sounds.

Moctar has travelled far since then, commanding audiences across the world and feted in the pages of the transatlantic music press. But on *Funeral For Justice*, it remains the socio-political backdrop of Niger – where grinding poverty and terrorism are still a day-to-day reality – that drives his music.

***Funeral For Justice* is a powerful album title. What does it mean to you?**

"I started wondering – does justice really exist? Of course, there is a system of justice, with judges and so on. But, for me, real justice doesn't exist in this world. When I look around, I see weaker people being manipulated by the system. I see great differences between the privilege of nations, in terms of how you get treated based on your skin colour. I see the rich dominating the poor, the powerful getting all the resources and their versions of the story being believed. Whereas the weak and the poor are treated as liars and their rights aren't respected.

"Take the example of a child dying. We lose kids every day in Africa. Many women still have to give birth under trees and drink dirty water. Whereas in Europe or the US, if a child was to die in that way, it would be on the front page. And how many kids die in the sea while trying to cross over to Europe for a better life? How many innocent kids whose parents don't even make $2 a day are being bombarded with bombs that cost millions? All this is what makes me say that there is no justice and that we need to write an album on that topic."

The album ends with *Modern Slaves*, a haunting acoustic lament to the status of your countrymen. What inspired that?

"This song reflects the fact that – in theory, on paper – Niger is free, and has been free since the 60s [when the country achieved independence from French colonial rule]. But that's not what we're seeing in real life.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY © EBRU YILDIZ 2023

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

It feels almost temporary. So that's what pushed us to record this track. Some people in Niger haven't even seen electricity, even though below their feet are uranium resources that other countries are mining – all they get is the dangerous uranium dust that remains. We have all the resources we need and still other countries are exploiting those and getting richer, while we're suffering.

"Another example is the CFA franc, which is printed in France and used locally – yet you can't use it in Europe. France calls itself our 'mother' and says it will take care of us, yet it is extremely difficult to get a visa to visit France, whereas obviously the other way around is not the case. So it feels like a modernised version of slavery."

What vibe did you want your guitars to have on *Funeral For Justice*?

"For me, the guitar reflects how the player is feeling. At least, that's how we play. I'm not someone to sit down at a table with a pen and paper and decide how it's going to sound. It's how I'm feeling deep inside that makes the guitar speak. If I'm singing about love, for example, you might feel like the guitar is caressing you. And if I'm trying to send out a very serious message that makes me angry, I think you're going to find out by listening to my fingers. My guitar solos depend entirely on how I'm feeling – with *Imouhar*, in particular, I wanted to really call out to people, so that's maybe why the solo sounds like it's reaching out."

"The guitar reflects how the player is feeling. At least, that's how we play. It's how I'm feeling inside that makes the guitar speak"

1. Mdou Moctar on stage at the 2022 Lowlands festival, Netherlands, with the band's producer and bass player, Mikey Coltun (who is interviewed, opposite)

2. Mdou Moctar's band (left to right): drummer Souleymane Ibrahim, rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane, Mikey Coltun, and Mdou

You're associated with the Stratocaster – why is that such a good model for you?

"I still like the Stratocaster. First of all, I really like the sound it produces and the dimensions fit perfectly with my body – and it doesn't hurt me. So that's what I'm looking for in a guitar. As for amps, I have to apologise because I don't know all the brands – and I don't remember the names of my pedals, either [see boxout with producer Mikey Coltun, opposite]. I just know what sounds I like."

Do you think good guitar playing is in the gear or under your fingertips?

"Obviously, I do think it helps a player progress if they like the sound they're producing. But, to me, the most important thing is how hard you work. You have to just keep practising, over and over, and push past your limits to really produce good music, just like in other fields. You could be given the best instruments in the world, but if you don't know how to play well, it's not going to sound good. However, if you've worked a lot and then you start to get some good instruments, it'll really be something. But it comes down to work."

PRODUCTION VALUES

Mikey Coltun on producing the *Funeral For Justice* sessions

What can you tell us about the guitars Mdou used on *Funeral For Justice*?
"Mdou used his American Professional series left-handed white Strat. We got this in 2018. It's a newer American-made Strat with Lollar pickups and a Sustainiac pickup at the neck. He uses D'Addario NYXL 10s and doesn't like the sound of new strings. I think the ones that were on the guitar for *Funeral For Justice* were two years old."

What effects did Mdou use for the sessions?
"In terms of pedals, we had a TC Electronic PolyTune 2 and an EarthQuaker Devices Acapulco Gold. I had the latter modded for an internal trim pot to not blow amps – Mdou tends to just turn the knobs on pedals all the way up so I needed to find a boost, but not too much, since the EarthQuaker pedal has a lot of headroom. There was the Union Tube & Transistor Shiny pedal, our signature [Champion Leccy] Rockstar Fuzz V1 – this pedal is almost always on as his preamp for slight crunch – and the Boss PH-3 Phaser and a Boss DD-7 for slapback delay.

"I took a few different DI signals from Mdou. There was a clean guitar without pedals, DI with pedals, and a DI with an amp simulator, which was just used for headphone monitoring. With the clean DI, I did use a few different Analog Man pedals such as the King Of Tone and Astro Tone Fuzz through an old Vibro Champ – that's what you're hearing on *Takoba*."

What details can you share about Mdou's amp setup?
"[Mixing engineer] Seth Manchester and I reamped Mdou's guitar through a Soldano SLO-100 and a Traynor 4x12 cab. This amp is made for Mdou. Since Mdou doesn't play with a lot of dynamics and it's pretty much just hard fingerpicking on the bridge pickup, there tends to be a lot of bright sizzly highs and not enough clarity. The SLO just scoops all the unwanted high frequencies out. For mics, we used a Neumann U 77 and Coles 4038, like, 3ft to 5ft away going into API preamps. After reamping, I throw a Space Echo [RE-]201 on the left and right sides for a bigger sound. There were no Roland JC-120s on this record – however, on some songs like *Oh France,* I used a Roland Chorus Echo [RE-]501 for that chorus sound. The chorus on the 501 is a bit different than the JC-120 – it's more similar to the Roland battery-powered Cube chorus, which is widely used throughout all of West Africa and one of Mdou's favourite amps."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY © EBRU YILDIZ 2023

You've spoken about hearing the desert blues pioneer Abdallah Oumbadougou perform, which led you to build your first guitar shortly afterwards. Were you inspired by any Western guitarists?
"Honestly, not really, because when I was very young I didn't have access to Western music. I just didn't have the technology to access it. Locally, the only artists we knew were very famous singers like Michael Jackson, Celine Dion, Tupac Shakur or some other rappers – but as you can tell, that was very different to what we were playing, so I can't say it had a big impact on me. But as soon as I started touring, I started going to other concerts and listening to more artists. In 2016, I was first introduced to Eddie Van Halen and Jimi Hendrix."

How important is music in Niger? Why do people need it so much?
"I can talk about my town of Agadez, at least, where music is almost like football in Brazil. Everyone wants to play guitar, everyone loves it. It really is a city of music. And it helps young people who don't have a job. If you know how to play guitar, you can perform at weddings, and some people get by that way – you can make $200 a week, sometimes even $2,000, if you're lucky. Other weeks there'll be no work, but maybe your friend will have found something else."

"[In] Agadez, music is almost like football in Brazil. Everyone wants to play guitar, everyone loves it. It really is a city of music"

You recorded most of *Funeral For Justice* over five days in an unfurnished house in upstate New York, with US bassist/producer Mikey Coltun. What are your favourite memories from the sessions?
"For me, my favourite memory was actually recording the song *Funeral For Justice*. It made me feel good, and it was the right time to do it, because it was a period in which I had lost many friends – so that will stay with me forever."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

3. The topics in Mdou's latest album may be weighty, but he also acknowledges the power of connection via upbeat music: "If people are enjoying the music through dancing," he says, "they might become curious about what I'm saying"

Do you think you play guitar differently in the studio, relative to on stage?
"It's totally different for me. I much prefer playing at concerts, rather than being locked up in a studio. Of course, I respect the work that sound technicians do, but I'm someone who loves the kind of freedom that I can't get in the studio. Honestly, I have a hard time following the exact time restrictions. Y'know, sometimes you have to follow the 'tick, tick, tick' of a click track, and I don't feel comfortable with those kinds of tools.

"That's why I think that sometimes our studio recordings are almost like a live performance. Even at concerts, we don't really write down exactly what we're going to do – because each concert is different. We always adapt to what we're feeling in the moment, and also reflect the energy of the audience."

Musically, the *Funeral For Justice* material seems to have more bite than your past albums. Why do you think that was?
"The music I make depends on what I'm feeling and what nature is giving me. At the moment, I feel like the world is a bit lost and that's why you might feel more anger in this album. But, for me, it's really important that the album sounds upbeat, too, because if people are enjoying the music through dancing, they might become curious about what I'm saying."

Do you think music can actually make a difference – that people won't just play *Funeral For Justice* in the background but actually reflect on what you're saying?
"I can't say for sure, but I feel that it will change something. I think today, many people have understood that they're being manipulated, especially in the African continent, where the youth have started to revolt against the injustices they face. So maybe, in the future, it will change something. At least, that's what I believe."

Mdou Moctar's latest album, *Funeral For Justice*, is released on 3 May on Matador

www.mdoumoctar.com

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The Strat At Seventy

AS LEO FENDER'S GREATEST CREATION CELEBRATES ITS SEVENTH DECADE, WE GATHER A REMARKABLE GROUP OF ARTISTS AND EXPERTS TO ASSESS ITS 70-YEAR IMPACT ON THE LANDSCAPE OF GUITAR MUSIC – KICKING OFF WITH SHADOWS PIONEER HANK MARVIN. WE ALSO ASK FENDER'S MASTER BUILDERS WHAT SEPARATES A GOOD STRAT FROM A GREAT ONE AND REVIEW THE NEW ANNIVERSARY MODEL FENDER HAS BUILT TO MARK THE BIG OCCASION...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Imagine you are musician walking past a shop window in 1954. You stroll past, take a glance... and then stop dead in your tracks. Behind the glass is what seems to be a rocket ship, its sunburst finish glowing like polished amber. The guitars around it seem bulky and cumbersome by comparison – even that upstart solidbody, the Telecaster, you first clapped eyes on a few years before, now seems like a tractor parked beside a Cadillac...

In 1954 there was no guitar like the Strat. More remarkable still, in the seven decades since, no other new guitar has had such a transformative effect on the guitar scene. Today, a Strat looks as familiar as a tree or a drinking glass. But 70 years ago, it had no real precedent. The shock of that arrival must have been all the greater in post-war Britain. Rationing was still in effect the year the Strat launched and a ban on imported goods from America, which included electric guitars, would remain in place until June 1959. Little wonder, then, that guest editor Hank Marvin describes his first experience of a real Strat as being akin to an encounter with "a guitar from Mars". To read the full account head to page 64.

In many ways, the Strat retained its power to astonish, to revolutionise. Just six years after Hank got his first Strat and made sweet, melodious musical history with it, Bob Dylan outraged a traditionalist crowd at the Newport Folk Festival by 'going electric' armed with a Strat, revolutionising popular music in America, at a stroke. Then, only 10 years after Hank's first encounter with Fender's most famous creation, Hendrix used a Strat to stir a magma-hot cauldron of sound into life when he played his epochal version of *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the muddy finale of the Woodstock Festival. Here, he delivered that historic event's most powerful moment as its unprecedented crowds ebbed away in the grey morning light.

At all times, the Strat has seemed to have the capacity to astonish built into it. In the following pages we pay tribute to its enduring power, in company with dozens of influentual artists who have made music history of their own with a Strat. We also receive insights from luthiers who know the instrument inside out – Fender Master Builders Paul Waller and Austin MacNutt – and review the latest Anniversary Strat to join the fold. So join us as we wish happy birthday to an electric icon...

Thanks to Fender, Chris Turpin, and Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath

This 1960-spec Custom Shop Stratocaster – belonging to former *Guitarist* Editor Neville Marten – captures the essence of what must have seemed viscerally astonishing at the close of the 1950s. Bold colour, electrifyingly exciting sounds and a shape straight from dreamland

PHOTO BY RYAN PIORKOWSKI (FMIC)

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The Soul Of A Strat

WHAT MAKES ONE STRAT ORDINARY AND ANOTHER OUT OF THIS WORLD? IT'S A QUESTION PLAYERS HAVE PONDERED FOR THE LAST SEVEN DECADES – AND WHO BETTER TO EXPLAIN THAN MASTER BUILDERS PAUL WALLER AND AUSTIN MACNUTT OF FENDER'S CUSTOM SHOP. WE JOIN THEM TO TALK VINTAGE TONE, MIRACLE MODS AND SANDING – LOTS OF SANDING...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

Which is the greatest era of Strat in your personal opinion?
Paul Waller: "For me, it's early 60s. I think that's when the Strat really started to come into its own. Putting the rosewood on there, slimming out the neck, and the pickups started getting dialled in to really make what pure Strat sounds are for me."
Austin MacNutt: "I like the late-50s Strats – just the classic look. They all look great, but I feel like they really got it right, right out of the gate."

What do you regard as an ideal weight for a Strat?
Paul: "I personally like just under 8lbs – maybe 7¾lbs."
Austin: "Yeah, that's a good range. I'm not terribly picky about it, honestly. I've got Strats all over the weight spectrum [in my personal collection] and I don't tend to go for one more than the other because of the weight – it doesn't affect my choice as much as [it might for] some people."

What's your favourite body wood for a Strat?
Austin: "I have go to with ash. I love the look of it, especially if you can get a nice, lightweight piece. And they're out there. I like seeing the grain – it's a little more interesting than an alder body, speaking personally."
Paul: "Yeah, I really like ash-body Strats and it's a dirty little secret that, because I like the 60s neck, when I get a customer that orders an ash-body 60s, I'm like, 'My dude!' [laughs]"

This original 1956 Strat is an early alder-bodied example from around the time Fender transitioned away from ash – but Master Builders Paul Waller and Austin MacNutt personally prefer the more striking looks of ash

This refinished (but otherwise original) 1961 Strat embodies what Paul Waller calls the period when "the Strat started to come into its own... and the pickups started getting dialled in"

STRAT SHOOTOUT!
We pit a range of historic Strats against each other and this new release – which will be the winner? Find out at **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

What are your favourite pickups for Strats?
Paul: "It's tough."
Austin: "That is tough."
Paul: "Do you want to go first?"
Austin: "I feel like it's a revolving door... I mean, I just finished one that had Ancho Poblanos in it and I was just playing it and I was like, 'Wow, this sounds really good.'
Paul: "I almost feel like certain pickups might sound better in certain combinations, but, yeah, it definitely moves around for me. I've designed sets of pickups that we have here and I've put a lot of those sets in guitars, and they tend to be on the lower-output side, more like a vintage [set]. But, then, I also really like '69s, anything with enamel [wire]. The set I designed actually has one enamel in it, in the neck, so you can get that really fat 'Jimi' stuff with it, but then I also like the '62s as well. So that was my way of getting the best of both worlds: having a '62 set in the bridge and middle, and an enamel '69 in the neck. That was a fun set to do. I get a lot of orders for those.

"But it's so hard to say what's best because they're all so good. Especially when you have access to the winders that are making the premium stuff. Pickups are also easily altered by adding copper or taking copper away, mixing magnets... It's quite a soup recipe with a lot of ingredients that can be changed very easily."

1. This Fender Custom Shop Heavy Relic 1962 Stratocaster was made by Master Builder Dale Wilson and shows how adept the Custom Shop is at relicing guitars

> **"Pickups are easily altered by adding copper or taking copper away, mixing magnets... It's quite a soup recipe"** PAUL WALLER

A lot of players want Strats with quarter-sawn maple necks. What benefits does a quarter-sawn neck bring, in lutherie terms?
Paul: "One of the guys here took a piece of maple and cut it into a 1x1-inch cube and we made sure it was dimensionally the same in both grain directions with a calliper. Then we put it in a press and measured the deflection from point A to point B – you know, the deflection in the middle [when both ends were subjected to a high-pressure load] – and it was the same in both flat-sawn and quarter-sawn. So that really spoke to how maple is one of those materials where it's already really strong, even without the grain orientation. So I would say 'stability' is a word that people should be using, not 'strength' when it comes to grain orientation. A [quarter-sawn maple neck] is going to be a more stable neck, probably, but not necessarily any stronger."

2. On the mass-production side, Fender's Vintera II 60s Strat offers suprisingly authentic vintage tones, as a recent shootout video confirmed (see above). Pickups remain a key area where makers can dial in sonic character to suit a particular era

What are your thoughts on using roasted or torrified maple in Strat necks?
Austin: "I like it. It has a nice look. It oils up well if you're going down that route of an oiled neck; it feels great."
Paul: "I like it, too – I would say the light-roasted version, though. Anything beyond that starts to get too brittle for me and you can get other issues with cracking, and I would be concerned about the longevity of the instrument. I mean, Fenders are designed and built to last forever, so material is an important aspect of that. Anything beyond a light roast I'm not going to be interested in. That has to do with experience of having issues with the darker roasted pieces."

Tell us a really cool setup tip or maintenance tip for Strats.
Paul: "Just leave the bridge alone. The traditional Fender [Strat bridge

This 1966 Strat, refinished by renowned British specialist Clive Brown in Firemist Silver, is set up with the bridge flat against the body. According to Paul Waller, this is the most practical arrangement for most players

PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

setup] is the floating bridge. And that's fine if you're using the bar all the time. But, after speaking with a lot of guys, they're not really hammering on the bar. Maybe it's for a specific song or something... but not too many live in that world all the time. And so now I set up Strats where the bridge is actually sitting on the face of the guitar. That way, it'll always come back to pitch and you don't have to worry about putting your thumb on it and changing its pitch. Then, if you decide you want to use the bar, you can put the bar in and dive it, which would satisfy most people.

"For the few that want the floating bridge, you can float your bridge, but you're just asking for trouble at that point. That's why things like Floyd Rose exist, because of floating bridges, and the type of music that came out of that era. That was a problem that needed to be solved and so [the Floyd Rose] came about. But, now, with today's music, that's not really necessary so much. Running with the trends of how guitar players are playing today, that's how I set mine up and I would suggest anybody do it that way."

Some players believe that hardtail Strats have something extra-special about them. What are your thoughts on that?

Austin: "They have a different feel to it, for sure. Yeah, I like them."

Paul: "I do, too. I've always liked them because I've always been into Teles, so it was an easy segue for me to do a hardtail Strat. But I would say that they're a bit more hit and miss than a standard Strat. Hardtails are more like Teles, where there tends to be a bit more variance and good ones and bad ones. But when you get a good one it's like, 'Oh boy, what have I been missing?' They can be special, for sure."

3. This Custom Shop Strat belongs to Chris Turpin of roots-rock band Ida Mae. It features a control plate patterned after one fitted to a 1954 prototype presented to George Fullerton, then Vice President of Production at Fender

> **"For the few that want the floating bridge, you can float your bridge, but you're just asking for trouble"** PAUL WALLER

What are your personal favourite electronics mods for Strats?

Austin: "I like having the 'blender' in it, so you have [three knobs that control] volume, tone and the blender [allowing bridge-and-neck and all three pickups to be engaged at once]. I think that's incredibly useful."

Paul: "I've been doing that a lot lately, too, especially with a humbucker [in HSS builds], because now you can get the humbucker and the neck [using] the blender. I would say in the last 20 years, that's been one of the greater upgrades for the Strat. Because you really can't fix much on the Strat, but that helped bring in some stuff and now somebody that's maybe playing country can kind of get a Tele thing out of it with the blender."

4. Nile Rodgers with the 1960 Strat that became known as the 'Hitmaker'. He used it to create songs that led to some 500 million record sales – Paul Waller says it's one of the best-sounding Strats he's ever played, too

What's the best Strat you've ever played?

Austin: "I did a refret on a '58 years ago that someone brought me, that one just sounded amazing. Maybe it was just one of the first vintage ones I worked on, but I played that one for a while before I called the owner and had him come pick it up!"

Paul: "That's a tough question. A couple that stick out – Ronnie Wood has a hardtail Strat and that one was incredible, I think it was a '55. And then Nile Rodgers' Hitmaker Strat, that one's incredible." G

www.fendercustomshop.com

70 Strat's Life

MORE THAN 30 OF THE WORLD'S TOP STRATOCASTER PLAYERS JOIN US TO SHARE THEIR LOVE OF LEO'S DOUBLE-CUT MASTERPIECE

Words Andrew Daly, Jamie Dickson & Jason Sidwell

Hank Marvin

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"Going back to my school years, hearing the intro and solo of The Crickets' *That'll Be The Day* on a jukebox was a revelation, and motivated me to try to copy this 'new to us' American style of rock 'n' roll guitar. As regards my own playing, I thought *The Theme From The Deer Hunter (Cavatina)* was special as it's a beautiful composition written by Stanley Myers, and also my performance was recorded in one take, except for one note where there was an odd distortion. I dropped in and replaced the note.

"A couple of other recordings that I like for different reasons are *Hot Rox*, which I wrote with my son Ben; it was fun for me to go nuts and play an extended blues-rock solo. And also *Ain't No Sunshine* arranged for me by Mark Griffiths, which gave me an opportunity to play a jazzy, blues-influenced solo. Very satisfying."

What's your best tip for getting great tones out of a Strat?

"Because I use the vibrato bar and most of the time have it held in my right hand, I was forced to pick nearer the fingerboard, rather than the bridge. This produces a slightly sweeter tone. I would also not have too much top on the amp. In fact, the early AC30s – it's their 65th anniversary this year! – did not have a top boost function and then, when they added it, I discovered that if not used with restraint it would cause Bruce [Welch] to howl in pain – or perhaps he was just singing?"

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"From late 1958 to early '59 I was playing an Antoria, which had a neck designed and constructed by Fred Flintstone, who thought he was making a club. To put me out of my misery Cliff [Richard] bought me my first Strat in spring 1959. It was red with a bird's eye maple neck and fingerboard, and gold-plated hardware. It looked out of this world. A guitar from Mars. It unfortunately had very heavy strings, something like 13 or 14 to 56, impossible to bend a string, other than the second string up a half-step, but I was saved by the vibrato bar, which enabled me to pull the second string up a whole tone. But it had to be set up to enable that. At that time, the only finger vibrato I was aware of was the classical one, which doesn't work too well on heavy steel strings. Wanting to make the guitar 'sing' more, I found using the vibrato bar achieved that. I also used it to dip the pitch and sometimes to give the strings a wild shake as on the intro to The Shadows' hit *Man Of Mystery*. I certainly would not have been able to develop that on any other guitar available in those days."

Rosewood or maple?

"I prefer a bird's eye maple fingerboard. I always thought it looked better. How shallow is that? But importantly I like the feel under my fingers."

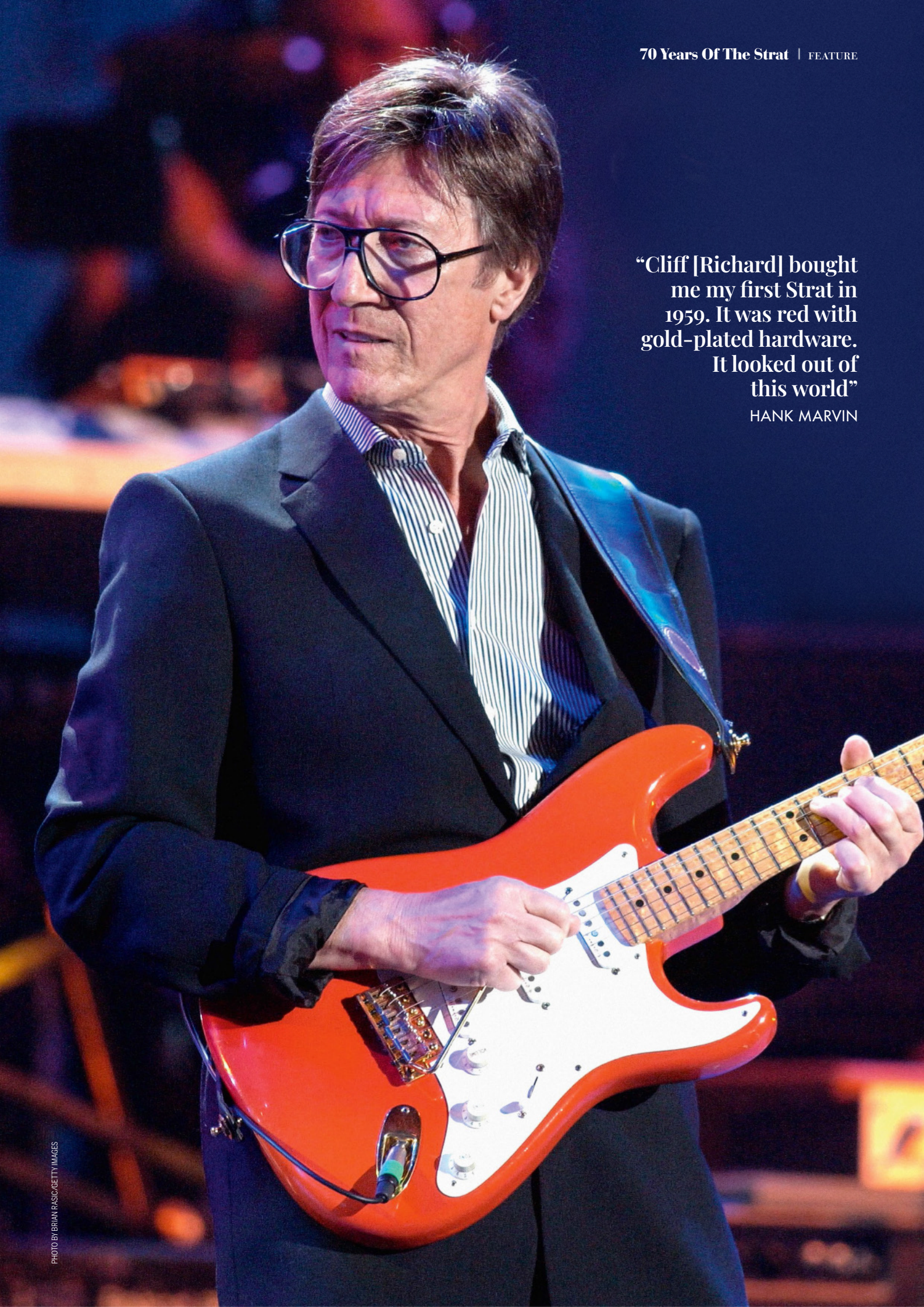
Strats look coolest in what finish?

"A red Strat is historically associated with me, although I have had and performed with both white and black Strats."

You've never been a stickler for playing vintage Strats, but do you own any?

"The Strats I've used since 1989 have been my Custom Shop Signature models, which are based on a 1958 red one that I used through the 80s. That '58 is the only vintage Strat I own."

PHOTO BY MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



"Cliff [Richard] bought me my first Strat in 1959. It was red with gold-plated hardware. It looked out of this world"

HANK MARVIN

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

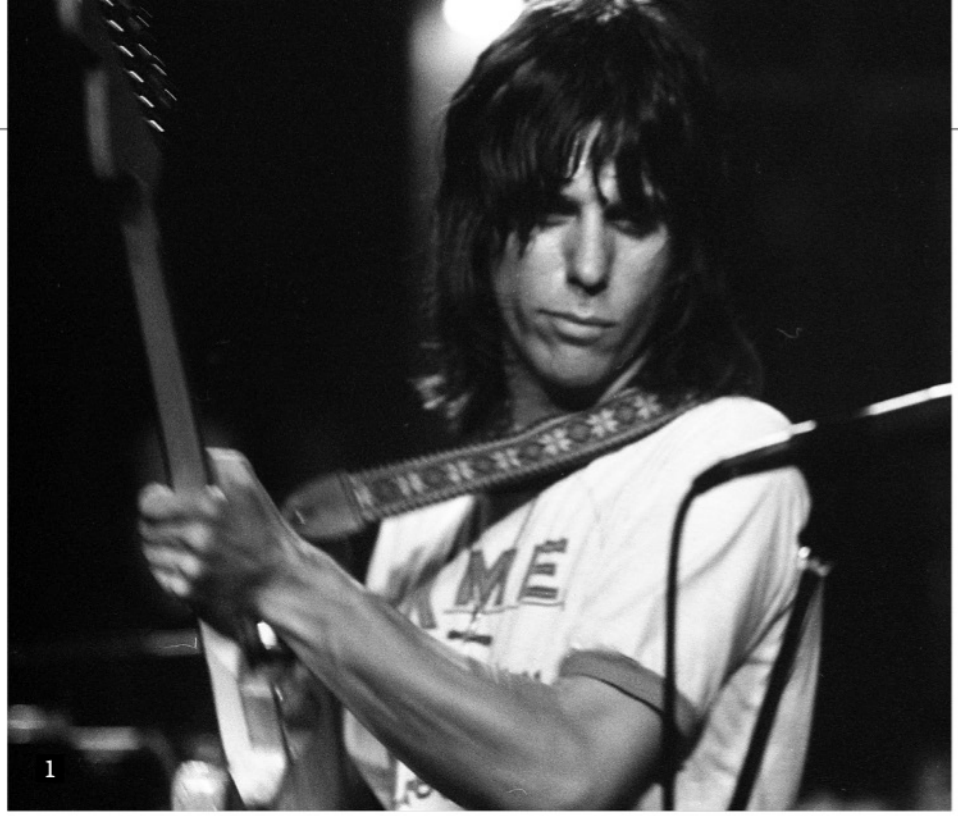


PHOTO BY WATAL ASANUMA/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

1. Jeff Beck's playing on his 1976 album *Wired* is cited by many as the pinnacle of what can be expressed on the Strat. Beck is pictured here at the Roundhouse in London in '76

Jennifer Batten

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"Jeff Beck's *Wired* album. The tones that he got out of the guitar were, and continued to be throughout his life, absolutely magnificent."

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"I'd have to go with my years of playing with Jeff Beck: he was using a Marshall DSL, one of three prototypes before production began. He used a [Pro Co] Rat [2 Distortion] pedal and later a [J Rockett] Archer. His pedal use was always minimal. He got reverb and delay dialled in by the monitor/front-of-house engineers as part of rehearsal so nothing else was clogging his tone. Other pedals would sneak in from time to time, like a Snarling Dogs Wah, flanger for the intro of *Blue Wind*, which was immediately out of the chain after, and a ring modulator on the *You Had It Coming* tour."

> **"The Strat feels organic, it moves up and down and back and forth in sync with you. It can twang and it can sizzle"** MARK BOWEN

Mark Bowen, Idles

Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?

"It is the quintessential electric guitar. If you ask someone to draw an electric guitar, they will invariably draw a Strat. It feels organic, there are no edges or corners, it moves up and down and back and forth in sync with the expression of your movement. It can twang and it can sizzle. It can cope with big ol' strings. The necks – especially the big thick 70s ones – just feel right to me. You wield a Strat, not just play on it."

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"There's too many, that's the whole point. Hendrix, SRV, Knopfler, Morello. But the most important for me is my guitar hero, Dick Dale, who changed music with a Strat. He sculpted and carved what guitar music was."

Tyler Bryant

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"I grew up idolising Jeff Beck... He was and will always be the freakiest guitarist to me. If I can figure out how to pull a fraction of the sounds out of my Strat that he pulled out of his, I'll feel like a winner. With a good Strat, the sonic possibilities are endless."

Mitch Dalton

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"I vividly remember the 'light bulb' moment regarding the Strat. It occurred at a holiday camp in Devon and I must have been eight or nine years old. The jukebox there continuously belted out 60s hits of the day. As I walked past on the first day, the menacing sound of low quaver tom-toms filled the air for four bars, to segue into – BLAMMO! – the guitar intro to *Apache*. The cutting tone, the tremolo arm, the reverb and echo, the minor key... That was that. There was no going back."

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"I'd been working in studios for about five minutes when it became deafeningly obvious that I needed a versatile instrument capable of responding to the musical and stylistic demands of any job that might be thrown my way. It had to be a Strat. I trawled through the pages of *Exchange & Mart* and there it was: 1962 pre-CBS item, £150 or nearest offer. I'm told it's worth a shed load of money [today]. All I know for certain is that it sounds great, especially when you do The Shadows walk at the same time."

TYLER BRYANT PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Kirk Fletcher

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"I love making a Strat fatter. I shy away from the [Ibanez] Tube Screamer thing; the pedals I like with the Strat have always been Lovepedal's Tchula [Boost] or the [Vemuram] Jan Ray [Overdrive]. It could also be a clean boost pedal with some really cooking non-master volume Fender amp, like a Super Reverb or Tweed 4x10 Bassman. Or a whole other approach from my gospel days – a loud, clean amp like a [Fender] Twin, Jazz Chorus, or even a Peavey Renown, believe it or not."

What is the greatest tone made with a Strat on a record?

"Firstly, Jimi Hendrix's *Machine Gun*. Secondly, Doyle Bramhall II on his first solo album, self-titled. With the tone on *Stay A While*, he really turned my head around on getting the fattest tone from a Strat. I saw him live in the mid-90s and he had the sparsest gear you could imagine: a reissue [Fender] Bassman, a couple of Strats and a couple of pedals. It sounded incredible! I realised how much tone is in the mind and the hands; the heart and soul, too. Finally, Michael Landau: literally any recording, but how about *Born In The Rain* off *The Star-Spangled Banner* record?"

Brett Garsed

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"I really like using fuzz tones with mine as it'll fatten up the back pickup. If you can get that kind of sound with pedals it allows a Strat to do what it does naturally, so you can have the best of all worlds tonally."

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"This is an impossible question to answer, but the first person that came to mind for me was Rory Gallagher."

PHOTO BY TIBBY FLORA

2. Stevie Ray Vaughan was a force of nature when he played live on the Strat. Pictured here in New York, 1981, his gig at the El Mocambo club in Toronto, two years later, is deemed by many to be his greatest to make it onto a recording

What is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?

"There are a couple for me. One of the best years was '56: the soft V-shaped neck, super comfy, and that old two-tone lovely nitrocellulose look. A friend has one and it has to be one of the most resonant Strats ever – last of the ash bodies, so the weight is perfect. My next favourite might be a '60 slab-'board for the aesthetic of the finish. The dark, dark oxblood red is different from the later fire-engine reds... and the slab 'board is great. But I think the '64s were the best neck shape: girth without being overly fat."

Eric Johnson

What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?

"One of the things I like to do is to put the tone control on the bridge pickup and roll it off a bit. Also, I put the bridge pickup quite close to the strings to make it a little stronger."

Richie Kotzen

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"Ritchie Blackmore's intro to the song *Woman From Tokyo* is one of the greatest-sounding rock 'n' roll guitar intros played on a Strat. It is relatively clean with just enough gain to give it power and attitude [and] he sits in time with the drums. This is something a lot of fans take for granted, but it is a very important component in how and why performances 'sound' as they do."

Rebecca Lovell, Larkin Poe

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"[Stevie Ray Vaughan's] *Live At The El Mocambo* is probably one of the most inspirational exhibitions of a Stratocaster from where I sit. Also, we played Doheny Blues Festival in California five or six years ago and watching Jimmie Vaughan play his Strat on stage was like raising hair on the back of the neck. When you see somebody playing with that authority, that is a connective moment where you understand the instrument's power."

PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?

"It's all in the right hand – and that's coming from someone who started out as an acoustic player. It's taken me a long time to understand the appropriate amount of force to use on a Strat. Because watching a player like Stevie play, you begin to understand how much violence the guitar can actually take [laughs]. You can draw a lot of dynamics out of your instrument if you're willing to muscle in but also lighten up. I've broken thousands of strings on my blessed guitar... poor thing [laughs]."

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"On a track called *Bad Spell* I used a Fender Deluxe with a Royal Jelly by Beetronics. It's like a really overblown fuzz pedal that gives a kiss of an octave sound to it. It's got a little bit of a slap on it and sounds really sick."

> **"I really connect the imagery and essence of Stratocasters to Jimi Hendrix and the 60s era of art and music"** GIRL IN RED

Girl In Red

Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?

"The Strat was my first ever electric guitar, so for me it's the epitome of what the electric guitar is. And now I use it because it's iconic and I love the sound."

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"The most iconic Strat player will always be Jimi Hendrix. Not only was he a really cool guitarist, but I really connect the imagery and essence of Stratocasters to Jimi Hendrix and the 60s era of art and music."

PHOTO BY NINA WESTERVELT/WWD VIA GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY WILL IRELAND

3. Allen Hinds says that, even more so than for other electrics, a really thorough setup is essential if you want to get the best from a Fender Stratocaster

Allen Hinds

What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?

"How many times have I gone into a store, seen a beautiful Strat and when I pick it up, it immediately turns me off due to an improper setup? And by a 'setup' I mean several things: neck pitch, truss rod, fret continuity, each individual saddle's height, pickup height, bridge screw adjustment, intonation. When all this is right, your hands have a much better chance of ultimate expression, feel and tone."

PHOTO COURTESY ORANGE LIGHT

Steve Lukather

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you the most?

"This is tough to answer. I suppose Jimi was my first 'Wow, I love that sound!' moment. Doesn't hurt if you *are* Jimi... Jeff Beck's *Where Were You*, all of SRV's stuff, David Gilmour... Mike Landau knows how to make a Strat sing. Eric Johnson. Man, it's hard to answer completely."

What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?

"Be a great player [laughs]. A great amp... Marshall and Fender amps come to mind. I suppose a Dumble, but I had a very early 1980 Dumble Overdrive Special I bought for 1,000 bucks. But for *me*, it was hardly a magic amp. Only thing magic was the 2,000 per cent I made when I sold it! It really is the players that use them."

Yngwie Malmsteen

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"When I was seven or eight years old, I bought a 'Strat', but it wasn't a Fender; it was a bogus copy. But it was exact, you know? And the first thing I noticed was that I hated the pickups. So I went to the music store and they sold me something called a Fat Strat pickup, which was still a single coil, and it sounded way better.

"That was the one and only thing I found with Strats that I don't like: the pickups. I think they're awful. But that's just me. Because you'll hear Hendrix and you hear all these other guys, and they sound great with them. I mean, my playing style is... different because it's not only the blues, it's more linear and I just play a very different style than most guitar players do. Other than that, man, fuck, the Strat is amazing."

Which is the coolest Strat headstock?

"I like them all. But I always kind of gravitated to a big headstock because it just looks really cool. And secondly, if you don't know this, now you shall: on a solidbody electric guitar, like Telecaster or Stratocaster, the sound resonates not really from the body but from the headstock. If you take the body of the guitar and hold it against the wall, you get nothing. But if you put the headstock against the wall, the whole wall vibrates the sound from the Stratocaster, like from the volume of the guitar. Basically, the resonance is from the headstock. So the bigger headstock would have more volume."

Strats look coolest in what finish?

"I have a hilarious story for you. When I was a kid, I used to do a lot of gigging, and it was not like in America, where you could play in Top 40 bands, you know? I had a band with a real guitar player, believe it or not, and his father was a well-off guy who had his own company. So his father was like, 'You kids can play here every weekend, as long as you play one ABBA song and one Beatles song.' I was 12 or 13 years old and we got paid. One day, somebody filmed the show on one of these [Kodak] Super 8 cameras. I was wearing black and I was playing a black Strat. And what I saw in the picture in the film was... it looked like I was just playing a fucking pickguard. All I saw was the pickguard. I said, 'Fuck it.' I went home, took the guitar apart and painted the guitar white. From then on, I said, 'I need the lighter-coloured guitars.'"

> **"I'd [never] write music in the way I do without the Strat. It's so dynamic, it makes you play in a different way"** SIMON NEIL

DeWayne 'Blackbyrd' McKnight, P-Funk

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"While I was in one of my favourite music stores in midtown LA called Grants School Of Music, I looked behind the counter and saw a guitar that looked exactly like a sunburst Strat with a maple neck but no Fender logo on it. I asked Mrs Grant if it was for sale. She said yes; it was $68. I begged my parents to buy it for me to no avail. As my 18th birthday was coming up, my brother offered to buy the guitar for me. I thought it was a copy, but at one point I took the neck off the guitar to find a date: it was 9-58. I showed the guitar to an expert and he confirmed it was a 1958 sunburst Fender Stratocaster. I still have the body of the guitar – and the rest is a horror story, which I won't go into."

What's your best tip for getting great tone from a Strat?

"I've been told that I am a heavy-handed player, so I need the action at a level to compensate for that. I first set my strings to 5/64th-inch off the frets across all the strings, measuring from the bottom of the strings. My favourite tech told me that this is the lowest measurement to get a good tone for the way I play. If my hands and my guitar have a great relationship, gear and anything else is a plus."

Tom Morello

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"Jimi Hendrix, David Gilmour, Jeff Beck, Ritchie Blackmore, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Andy Gill of Gang Of Four and Brother Wayne Kramer of the mighty MC5 have all wielded the Strat in inspirational ways – and my 'Soul Power' Strat allowed me to unlock a new era of sound and fury in Audioslave."

Simon Neil

Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?

"I don't think I'd have ever come to write music in the way that I do without the Stratocaster. It's so percussive, so dynamic, it makes you play in a different way. My very first one was gifted to me by my bandmate's dad, and I recorded our first three records on that Stratocaster. It's the most expressive guitar I've ever played – there's a reason I'm still playing it now!"

4. DeWayne's first experience with buying a Strat resulted in him bagging a bargain: $68 for a '58!

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

PHOTO BY PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES

Oz Noy

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"Jimi Hendrix: he started it all and opened the doors for everybody. Jeff Beck took the instrument to the next level, pushing the envelope further than anyone so far. Stevie Ray Vaughan took Hendrix, Clapton, Albert King & BB King and made it into his own personal style with the most glorious tone ever imagined. Eric Johnson, the most original rock player since Hendrix and Beck, invented his new vocabulary of blues-rock and beyond."

Carlos O'Connell, Fontaines DC

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"Best drive would be anything that chokes, anything with good sag in it. Fender Blender is a classic effect that takes the dynamic in a Strat so well. Right now, I'm using a 636P by Soundgas based on the preamp from the old Grampian spring tanks. The choke on it makes the Strat top-end sound so fuzzy and really brings out the low-end that's so perfectly balanced on the Strat, making it feel like the cones in the amp are about to blow up."

PHOTO BY JMENTERNATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES

5. Though Joe Perry is often associated with the Gibson Les Paul, the Strat has been central to his sound since the early 70s

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE

> **"There's an undeniable power to the Strat; when I play, there is no fear and I'm transported to a different state of being"** ARI O'NEAL

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"The obvious answer is Hendrix. But Frusciante has to be the most exciting and sensitive Strat player in modern music."

Ari O'Neal

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"I got my first Strat when I was in college from a pawn shop. I wanted something that sounded more diverse and versatile, and the Strat does that for me. I have been playing it ever since! There's an undeniable power to it; when I play, there is no fear and I'm transported to a different state of being."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Joe Perry

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"Anything Jeff Beck did in the last 30 years since he put down his Les Paul and was exclusively a Strat guy. I saw him play at the Boston Tea Party touring behind the first album, and they did a song from their new upcoming album [*Beck-Ola*], and he switched to a Strat for that; it was *Jailhouse Rock*. He used the Strat and the vibrato as part of his vocabulary. He used that [vibrato] in a musical way – way more than anybody else that I've ever heard. Jeff was heads, hands and feet above everybody else when it came to using everything a Strat had to offer."

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"To start with, I would take an old Klon pedal and put it into a small Fender. Then I would probably put a compressor on it somewhere; I have a Carl Martin [Compressor Limiter], and Universal Audio has a really good one called the 1176 [Studio Compressor]. I would go for that before I go for more overdrive."

In your opinion, which is the coolest Strat headstock?

"I think the bigger one [from the 70s] looks cool. There's no denying that the guitar is a phallic-looking musical instrument. And, you know, to dot the i's and cross the t's, the bigger headstock does it..."

Ana Popović

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"I'd have to go with Riviera Paradise *by* Stevie Ray Vaughan from the album *Live from Austin, Texas*."

What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?

"Put the toggle switch in the second or fourth position. Combining the Alnico V pickups with a Fender clean-toned amp, such as Super Reverb or Deluxe Reverb, is as close to the heart and soul of a Fender Strat as you can get, especially if played on a maple-neck Strat."

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"It was in '96, I believe at a shop in my hometown of Belgrade, Serbia. I bought a secondhand CBS Strat from 1975 with a natural finish. That got me through the first shows with my first band."

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?

"In my opinion, a Mesa/Boogie Mark IV with an original Ibanez Tube Screamer [TS808]. You can even use two for an extra boost! Then add an original Boss Chorus."

Who do you regard as the greatest Strat player of all time?

"Jimi was revolutionary; he changed the accustomed way of playing guitars in the 60s and 70s, and the Strat and Fender were never the same

PHOTO BY LELAND HAYWARD

after that. Stevie Ray Vaughan added sweetness to the Strat tone, and that hasn't been heard before or after; Stevie's fluency was astonishing and new to the game. And then Jeff Beck went even further to broaden the musical spectrum; Jeff widened the sound options and modernised the approach on a Strat in the 90s."

Strats look coolest in what finish?
"My favourite is my signature 'Foggy' finish, which is called Foggy Mirror Chrome. When paired with a mirror pickguard, it's a showstopper!"

REI

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"My first memory of playing a Stratocaster was in kindergarten in NYC. It was a Made-In-Japan '62 Stratocaster from 1986 with the iconic three-tone sunburst. The Strat screams 'main character vibes' and also has a wide range of tones to offer, which is great for an artist like me who has all types of genres on one setlist/album."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Nile Rodgers

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"I got my Stratocaster in 1973 when I realised that it was what my sound was missing, and once I did... it changed my life 1,000 per cent. I have been able to write the jazz-influenced, dance-disco funk pop songs that people have loved for decades as well as rock, country, folk and EDM collaborations thanks to my Strat."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Philip Sayce

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"When I was in high school I worked after school and weekends in the plumbing department at Canadian Tire, making minimum wage with a goal of saving up for a 90s inexpensive black Strat with a maple neck, something that looked just like Clapton's. Oh, how I cherished that guitar; I spent thousands of hours playing it until it was sadly stolen, just days before the high school Battle Of The Bands. That guitar definitely set me on the course to acquire my first vintage pre-CBS Strat, 'Mother.'"

What is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?
"To me it's the rosewood veneer-'board 1963 Strat. Stevie Ray Vaughan is the ultimate 'Strat Boss', and my understanding is that he very often played veneer-'board guitars from 1962 or '63. Pre-CBS Strats can be great for various reasons... and '63 seems like a sweet spot. Both of my Strats, 'Mother' and 'Big Daddy', are from 1963 and I consider these 60-year-plus single-coil guitars as transcending any brand name as they are covered in my blood, sweat and tears, and millions of miles, over the last 20 years. I cherish them and feel grateful to have them in my family."

Josh Smith

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"It was 1994 and I saved up my gig money every week to buy my Stevie Ray Vaughan Signature Strat. I felt like I finally had a real guitar when I got it. I was 14 and I played the guitar almost exclusively for the next 10 years. I still have it, of course. I was playing that guitar when I opened for and met BB King; he signed the back of the headstock for me. I was playing that guitar when I met my wife. There is a sticker that says 'I love Niki' right next to BB's signature. That guitar will be with me always."

In your opinion, what is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?
"First, the '57 Strat, my personal dream guitar: the 'V' neck shape, the two-tone burst, the maple neck with the first-year alder body. It's the most versatile Strat ever made. Perfect. Then the '63 Strat: the perfect rosewood-'board Strat. Sounds like Jimi, SRV and all the prototype Strat sounds I hear in my head. Those two years and you are covered with Strats forever!"

6. Philip Sayce with the 1963 Strat that he calls 'Mother' – the guitar was made in the year he judges to be the pinnacle of Fender's Strat output

7. An original 1957 Strat from the Seven Decades Collection in London. Josh Smith reckons that year's distinctive 'V' neck profile makes it one of the true classics from the model's history

Tash Sultana

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"I was always begging my dad to get a guitar, and on my eighth birthday I was playing in my room and dad came in and said, 'Get to the lounge!' I thought I'd broken something, but waiting for me was a Black Squier Stratocaster."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?
"I prefer the cutaway on the body so I can get right down and dirty on the neck. Other guitars obviously also provide that, but I've just landed on Strats in this era of my life. I've always been a big fan of Stratocaster players and their guitars. For me, the Strat is easy, it's lighter, and I can literally beat the shit out of it on stage and it handles it well."

> **"I have [written] jazz-influenced, dance-disco funk pop songs, and rock, country, folk and EDM, thanks to my Strat"** NILE RODGERS

What amp/pedal combination sounds best with a Strat?
"What I'm trying to approach in my drive tone is matching my gain and sustain, as well as presence. I like that 'metal' squeak in the bends and for the guitar to ring out as much as possible – almost like an electrical current is crawling through the guitar."

Shane Theriot

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?

"You can't mention a Stratocaster without mentioning Jeff Beck. His performance on *Live At Ronnie Scott's* shows what is possible with the instrument when combined with his highly skilled hands and ears. During that show he makes use of everything on the instrument – tone knobs, whammy bar and volume knobs – in a highly musical way that I don't think other players have ever done. The song *Where Were You* off *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop* is such a beautiful piece of music that always inspires me."

Andy Timmons

When did you get your first Strat and what was it?

"I was in a Top 40 band in Miami, summer of 1984, and I only owned a Les Paul at the time, but all of pop radio was about the Nile Rogers' clean Strat rhythm tone, so I bought a 1983 Squier Strat – it was all I could afford. I immediately put EMGs in it because that's what Steve Lukather had in his guitars at that time. I still have that guitar and it's truly one of my best Strats!"

PHOTO BY BRIAN KILLIAN/GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO BY CHRIS WALTER / WIREIMAGE / GETTY IMAGES

8. Jimi Hendrix at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970. By any measure Hendrix was the major disruptor and innovator in late-60s guitar and his astonishing flair on the Strat turned the model's fortunes around for Fender. He remains, for many, the greatest Strat player of all time

> **"I looked in the music store window at the Strat for months before I had one. It's a rocket to outer space"** JIMMIE VAUGHAN

What is the greatest tone made with a Strat on a record?
"*Nowhere Man* by The Beatles, which I believe is John and George playing their matching Sonic Blue Strats, plugged into the same AC30 with massive compression and treble added at the board. I tried this for myself: two old Strats into an old AC30 – nailed the tone! Honourable mentions also go to *Texas Flood* by SRV and *Peggy Sue* by Buddy Holly."

What Strat moment on a recording inspires you most?
"Eric Johnson's entire Austin City Limits performance from 1991. That, paired with Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Live At The El Mocambo*, are the two ultimate documents of what the Stratocaster is capable of – along with Jeff Beck's *Emotion And Commotion* record and the *Band Of Gypsys* record... This is impossible [laughs]!"

Chris Turpin

What Strat moment on a recording (including live recordings) inspires you most to this day and why?

"For me it's the intro to *The Calvary Cross* by Richard and Linda Thompson. Thompson is a spellcaster. His playing style is frenetic, wild and entirely his own. The intro captures the essence of 1950s 'Strat tone' but somehow is oddly British. On a model of guitar that is so commonplace, probably more than any other guitar on the planet earth... you instantly know it's him. To have such a distinctive voice and unique touch on the instrument is something I've always strived for."

Jimmie Vaughan

Why do you play a Strat? What does it do for you that other guitars don't?

"I used to ride the bus downtown and look in the music store window at the Strat for months before I had one. For me, it's a rocket to outer space; it's my favourite guitar!"

PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Carl Verheyen

What's your best tip for getting great tone out of a Strat?

"I believe string gauge has very little to do with tone, and action height has everything to do with it. I can get SRV's tone using a 0.009 to 0.046 set because my action is not down on the deck. Pickup height matters as well. If the pickups are too high, you lose clarity."

In your opinion, what is the ultimate Strat there's ever been?
"They really got it right by the time the 60s rolled around. Once on tour in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I ran into Seymour Duncan when we were both doing masterclasses at the university. He said, 'Verheyen, you're a Strat guy. The best-sounding three pickups in a row that I've heard in years is on a '58 Strat at Voltage Guitars on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. You should own it!' I picked it up a few days later and he was right! The neck pickup is fat and woodsy. The middle pickup is glassy with a sparkling high-end. And the bridge pickup is bright but not like an icepick in the ears. Exactly what a Strat should be!"

Rosewood or maple?
"I've come to believe I get more definition playing with higher gain on my maple-neck guitars. Especially below C# on the 4th fret of the A string. I try to avoid a mushy low-end, so I can use the guitar's entire range."

70 Project Makeover

A VINTAGE STRATOCASTER IS OUT OF REACH FOR MOST OF US – BUT, WITH THE CORRECT PARTS AND SOME DILIGENT MODDING, A VINTAGE-CORRECT MODEL THAT APES AN ORIGINAL IN BOTH APPEARANCE AND SOUND COULD BE YOURS. BUT WHICH YEAR WILL IT BE: '54, '63 OR '74? THE CHOICE IS YOURS...

Words Huw Price

Project 1: 1954-style Stratocaster

When Fender released the Stratocaster in 1954, it was still a work in progress. There were several differences between the very earliest Strats and those that Fender was making by 1955. Some early features are merely cosmetic, while others have an audible effect on the tone. Here's our checklist for a vintage-correct early 1954 Stratocaster replica.

Body, Neck & Finish

Although pre-1958 Stratocaster sunbursts are usually described as 'two-tone', from late 1954 onwards there were actually three distinct shades: yellow, medium brown and tobacco brown. Only the very earliest 1954 Stratocasters had genuine two-tone sunbursts.

Achieving this look isn't hard and advanced spraying skills aren't necessary to achieve vintage-correct results. This is largely because the sprayers at Fender were still figuring out how to spray sunbursts at that time and it shows in uneven shading and lots of stray dark-brown blobs in the light area of the 'burst. The following is not quite how Fender did it, but the results should be fairly convincing.

An ash body is a must, and after grain-filling and sanding sealer coats, spray the sides of the body and the edges with tobacco brown or black lacquer to create the sunburst. To save on lacquer, you can stain the sides with Jacobean Oak before spraying. With the 'burst complete, spray the whole body with amber lacquer and follow up with several clear-gloss coats.

Go through the usual stages of wet and dry sanding followed by polishing compound and relicing, if that's the look you want. For a donor guitar, see if you can track down a Fender Lite Ash Strat from the mid-Noughties.

Plastics

The very earliest Strats have no serial number on the neckplate and the spring cover was stamped instead. Rather than the elongated string holes of later years, 1954 spring covers had round string holes that were just big enough for the ball-end.

PHOTOS BY JOBY SESSIONS

1. The brittle plastics used on pickup covers on early Strats tended to stay very white over time, as on this pristine 1954 guitar

2. No branding in the blank central section of these Kluson tuners marks them out as early 'no line' models

3. Long, carefully sculpted belly cuts were typical of very early Strats such as this '54 example

Unlike the tapered switch tip we're all used to, 1954 switch tips are nicknamed 'football' tips. To avoid confusion, we're talking American football here and the reason is obvious once you've seen one. The knob shape is also different, with a short skirt and straighter sides culminating in a wider top. These knobs were moulded from a white plastic that had a marbled appearance.

The pickup covers stayed very white and the edges were noticeably rounded compared with later covers. They were also notoriously flimsy and would wear through to expose the tops of the pickups. 1954 repro plastic parts are sold in sets by Armstrong Music, RebelRelic and others.

Hardware & Electronics

In 1954, Kluson tuners were unstamped, so were neither single- nor double-line. You'll need a round string-tree and, while you're considering the headstock, note how '54 edges were rounded over. Fortunately, a regular jack plate and vintage-style bridge will suffice. Just ensure you have pressed-steel saddles and a cold-rolled steel vibrato block.

Strats started out with 100k potentiometers, rather than 250k; this mellows the brightness and gives a smoother tone with a flatter frequency response. Couple these with a repro Orange 'phone book' paper/foil capacitor if you have the funds, but any 0.1µF capacitor should suffice.

"1954 switch tips are nicknamed 'football' tips, and we're talking American football here – it's obvious once you've seen one"

Fender introduced staggered slugs with Strat pickups, but the early 1954 stagger had the G slug lower than the D slug. Alnico III magnets with a 1/5-inch diameter were also used, and most boutique pickup winders should be able to replicate a '54 set. The early stagger might not sound quite right with plain G strings, so that's one detail you may choose to omit. Check out House Of Tone's aged vintage-correct 1954 set, complete with rounded covers and 52.8mm slug spacing.

Project 2: 1963 Stratocaster

For a vintage-correct 1963 replica, you'll need an alder wood body, preferably 2kg (4.4lb) or less, and a neck with a rosewood veneer 'board. Some of the Mexican-made vintage reissues are a great starting point, and we recommend Tokai Goldstar copies from the early 80s.

Body, Neck & Finish

If you want the vintage look, complete with grain lines and checking, a reliced nitrocellulose finish is the way to go. The same goes for the neck because many players prefer the feel of nitrocellulose or a neck that's been stripped to simulate wear. Stripping a poly-finished body can be time consuming, but the only requirements are a heat gun and plenty of patience.

You'll find a wide range of vintage-correct colours in aerosols from suppliers such as Manchester Guitar Tech and Rothko And Frost, so if you want to go the DIY route, check out some YouTube tutorials and give it a go. Alternatively, most professional guitar finishers are able to spray and relic nitro finishes, and getting a guitar refinished is a cheaper option than buying a custom-made or Custom Shop instrument.

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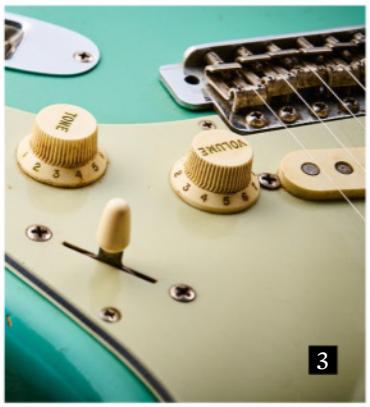

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PHOTOS BY PHIL BARKER

"If you want the vintage look, complete with grain lines and checking, a reliced nitrocellulose finish is the way to go"

Plastics

The green nitrate pickguard is one of the most striking features of any original 1963 Stratocaster. However, vintage examples have become eye-wateringly expensive and genuine celluloid repros are incredibly scarce. Occasionally, somebody will do a production run and they do show up at retailers such as Crazy Parts, or on eBay and Reverb.

Lashing's celluloid pickguards are worth checking out, but non-celluloid green 'guards are cheaper and widely available. During 1963, the screw between the neck and middle pickups shifted from dead centre towards the middle, but both versions are fine for a 1963 replica.

1. This Foam Green 1963 Strat is one of the rarer colours available in that period and was applied in the factory over a sunburst. Specialist suppliers can help you match these iconic hues however

2. Lacquer checking and darkening of areas like the headstock can be carefully emulated on your own Strat

3. The 'green' nitrate pickguards on original 1963 Strats like this one may be 'unobtainium' but modern plastic repros do the job well

After 1956, Fender began using a different type of plastic for knobs, switch tips and pickup covers. These parts could turn quite creamy or even light brown in colour. If you're creating a replica, there are plenty of aged plastic parts to choose from in various shades of off-white. The spring cover always remained single ply and originals stayed fairly white.

Hardware & Electronics

You will need a 'butterfly' string-tree with a metal spacer, and if you're buying Kluson tuners, make sure they're single- rather than double-line versions. Otherwise, for practical purposes, the bridge, block and saddle specs are identical to a 1954's. The same cannot be said for the electronics.

One striking difference is the full-sized aluminium shielding plate, which was presumably Fender's attempt to reduce single-coil noise in the wake of humbucking pickups. In our experience, the plate has a subtle effect, softening the glassy upper midrange and giving Strats a smoother character. Since they only cost between £10 and £15, it doesn't make any sense not to fit one. Check out Charles Guitars for options.

By 1963, Fender had started using a cheaper ceramic tone capacitor, but the value remained 0.1µF. You can buy nice replicas from Fake58 complete with the short length of yellow insulation tubing that fits between the capacitor and the neck pickup's tone control solder tag.

But most importantly, from mid-1962 Stratocaster pickups had narrower 3/16-inch slugs. This focuses the magnetic field more directly under the individual strings and provides a bit more space for extra windings. These later pre-CBS pickups can sound hotter than earlier examples, with a sweet response, added weight and tighter lows. For the correct 1963 specs, check out Bare Knuckles Pickups' Veneer Board set.

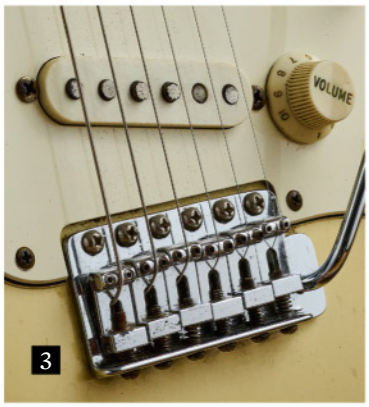
Project 3: 1974 Stratocaster

The notion that all 70s Stratocasters were a bit rubbish has been well and truly debunked. Comparing them to pre-CBS Strats makes as much sense as comparing Blackguard Telecasters with mid-1960s Teles. They are sufficiently different to be judged on their own terms, rather than suffer in spurious comparison. With interest in 70s Strats increasing, along with their prices, maybe it's time to think big headstock.

Body, Neck & Finish

By 1974, Fender had ceased using nitrocellulose and the bodies and necks both had poly finishes. Modern donor guitars and the bodies and necks offered by parts suppliers generally come with poly finishes, so there's no need to budget for an expensive refinish – you only need to decide which colour you prefer.

Most aftermarket bodies are pre-drilled for a four-bolt neck, but 'partscaster' bodies sometimes come undrilled and three-bolt kits are readily available online. Official Fender ones can be found on Reverb and eBay, but many consider the four-bolt arrangement superior, both sonically and structurally, and this is one period detail you may choose to forgo.



PHOTOS BY OLLY CURTIS

"The headstock is important. It has to be big, and has to have a 'bullet' truss-rod adjuster and that iconic bendy logo decal"

The headstock is the most important bit. It has to be big, it has to have a 'bullet' truss-rod adjuster and that iconic bendy logo decal. Your best bet will almost certainly be a Fender Classic Series neck. You might even consider a Classic Series Strat or one of the other Mexican reissues. Alternatively, check out Squier SQ, Greco Super Sounds and Tokai Silver Star models from the 80s 'golden era'.

Plastics

By 1974, Fender was using cheaper vinyl plastic-style three-ply 'guards, which look off-white with a black centre layer. The black/white/black pickguards didn't appear until 1975, and the pickup covers and knobs didn't differ that much from the later pre-CBS plastics.

1. This 1974 Strat, shot at World Guitars in Stonehouse, bears all the small spec changes associated with Fender's svelte doublecut in that year

2. The relatively clean look of the headstock can be partly ascribed to the use of poly finishes for both body and neck by this era

3. Blockier Mazak saddles were, like them or not, a key change to the Strat's design by 1974. This guitar's pickups appear to pre-date the move to non-staggered slugs, however, possibly making it an early 1974 model

For a 1974 replica, we'd be inclined to find a set of lightly aged and slightly off white-or cream plastic parts. You often see a bit of greening of the lettering on 70s knobs, and some replacement parts capture that quite well. Those of a DIY persuasion may consider relicing their own and there are plenty of tutorial videos detailing a range of methods.

Hardware & Electronics

The cost-cutting CBS corporation had stopped using aluminium shield plates by 1974, and 70s pickguards usually have some foil glued to the underside around the control area instead. Tone capacitors were ceramic disk types, but the value had changed from 0.1µF to 0.05µF. The modern equivalent is 0.047µF, and 0.003µF doesn't make an audible difference, but both will make a Strat sound a tad brighter and glassier than a 0.1µF capacitor.

1974 pickups featured plain enamel magnet wire, an average DCR of around 5.5k and, for the first time, non-staggered slugs with no edge bevel. This combination gives a fairly bright and sparkly tone, with plenty of bite and definition. They're not as fat or warm as early 60s pickups, but it's a classic tone nevertheless.

Fender made changes to the bridge assembly and, in 1974, they were single-piece units moulded from a cheaper alloy. So were the new 'blocky' saddles, and the alloy used was zamak aka 'Mazak'. These parts are named 'monkey metal', but that doesn't mean they sound bad. After all, some vintage Gibson fans will pay big sums for 1950s Mazak tailpieces and ABR-1 bridges.

Mazak has a warmer, fatter tone than steel, and is therefore a good match for 70s Strat pickups as well as PAFs. You may prefer steel bridge parts if sustain and brightness are priorities, but Mazak bridges contribute massively to that mid-'70 tone, and you can top that off with two 'butterfly' string trees with nylon spacers and a set of repro 'F' stamped tuners. G

70
FENDER 70TH ANNIVERSARY AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER
£2,139
WHAT IS IT? Top-of-the line evolution of the guitar that Leo Fender and Freddie Tavares designed seven decades ago
Tremolux Amp
NORMAL
VIBRATO
VOLUME
TREBLE
BASS
Fender

70

Form, Function, Finesse

TO CELEBRATE YET ANOTHER ANNIVERSARY FOR FENDER'S WORLD-BEATING 1954 DESIGN, THE COMPANY HAS THROWN EVERYTHING IT KNOWS ABOUT BUILDING GREAT STRATS INTO THE MELTING POT

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

You will have read many times in *Guitarist*'s pages that no two Strats are the same. And if you own more than one of these game-changing guitars you'll appreciate the truth in that statement. Ash body, alder body, rosewood or maple fingerboard, hardtail, traditional or floating vibrato; these apparently minor changes all impact the tone, albeit in subtle ways. Pickup height, string action, neck carve, and roller or conventional nut also play their part in how the guitar feels and sounds to each of us.

Back in the day, pretty much every operation to build a Fender guitar was carried out by workers who hand-sanded, hand-wound and hand-finished every aspect. And while much of this still happens in today's Corona California facility, modern production techniques mean tolerances are much tighter, and consistency is better by a long way.

The guitar we have here features in our 'Stratocaster Shootout' video (head to the link on page 78) where it battled against some heavyweight opponents from the 50s, 60s and 70s, as well as from Fender's own mighty Custom Shop. It did anything but disgrace itself in their company, and endeared itself to the players (this reviewer included) in the process. So, what is it that made us sing its praises so highly?

First of all, look at it! What a handsome beast it is, with its Comet Burst-finished flamed-maple top over an alder body, faux tortoiseshell pickguard and dark rosewood fingerboard, it's every inch a Fender thoroughbred. However, there's a lot more to the guitar than a quick glance reveals: the two-point floating vibrato bridge has been upgraded and features a cold-rolled steel block; pickups are the excellent 70th Anniversary V-Mod II single coils, each of which has been voiced for its specific position; and a push-push pot on the second tone pot brings in the neck pickup when positions one or two are selected, availing us of neck and bridge together, or all three pickups on – sounds not available from a conventional Strat.

Flip the body over and you'll notice the chamfered heel with 70th Anniversary neckplate, while running your fingers along the satin-finished neck will reveal how the fingerboard edges have been rolled for added comfort. Short-post locking tuners are there to help retain the guitar's tuning when using the more divebomb-friendly two-point vibrato, and let's not forget the 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fingerboard with tall narrow frets, designed for choke-free string bends and improved fretting accuracy.

We can't say for sure, but had Leo been given the chance to refine his creation seven decades down the line, it's likely that most of his potential upgrades are here. What we can say with absolute certainty is that constructionally and finish-wise, this guitar rivals many boutique makers' quality.

1

STRAT SHOOTOUT!
We pit a range of historic Strats against each other and this new release – which will be the winner? Find out at **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

Feel & Sounds

Grabbing the American Pro II out of its blue-lined Inca silver case and sitting it on our lap, we're greeted with a reassuringly satisfying lump of wood, plastic and metal. There's something pleasing, too, about a guitar that proclaims its newness, with no pretensions to ageing. The urethane Comet Burst finish glows over the centre-joined flame maple body cap, and Fender's attention to detail is evident all around, from the smooth feel of the satin neck to its rosewood fingerboard's beautiful fret job and gently rounded (rolled) edges.

Before playing a note the string action looks welcomingly low to medium height, but start chording, sliding, bending and hammering, and it's clear we have an exceptionally fine instrument here. The neck fills the hand perfectly, with just the right depth for tireless playing over long periods (20.8mm at the 1st fret fattening to 23.3mm at the 12th), and the strings glide over the 22 finely finished frets, making bends a breeze and vibrato slinky smooth.

With its two-point floating vibrato there's more travel and control here than with a screwed-down vintage type, and after a bit of new-string stretching it returns the guitar to pitch perfectly after gentle waggles or more drastic scoops and doops.

Our Laney Lionheart L20 combo has paired beautifully with every guitar we've put through it, and the 70th Anniversary Professional II is no different. It's a distinctly modern set of tones that one encounters. There's tons of clarity but with no hint of brashness. It's almost like a 'produced' Strat sound, as though it's been through a mixing board and some sort of 'exciter'.

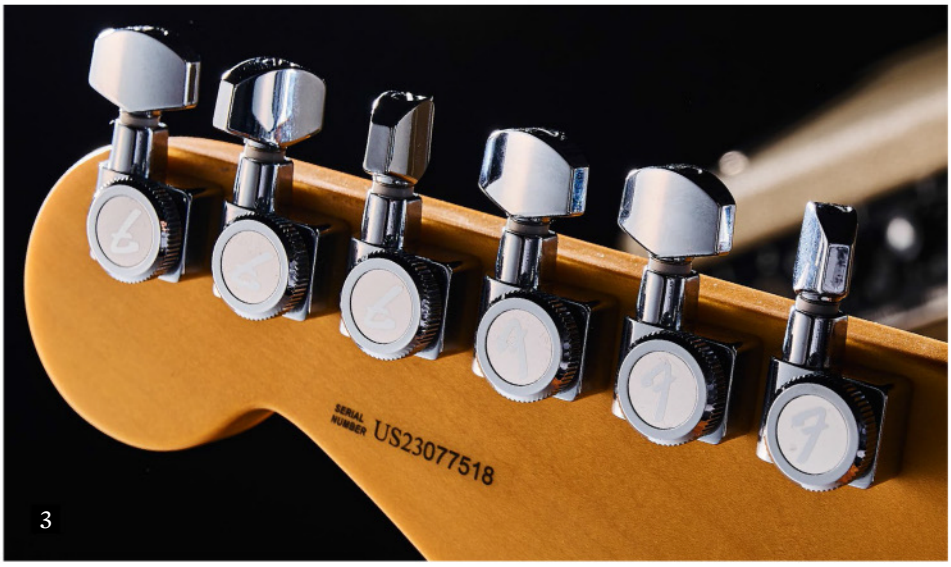
1. Fitted with a two-point floating vibrato there's more travel here than with a vintage style unit. And don't the tinted plastics look great against the tortoise style pickguard?

"You could spend many pleasant hours finding out just what a guitar like this is capable of, and it's a lot"

The V-Mod pickups are exceptional, and while they're not Noiseless types, as on the Ultra Strat also featured in the head-to-head (and which Leo probably would have stipulated), there was no obvious hum. All the pickup selections are clear, and as definitive in each position as we can recall. Imagine all the classic Strat tones and the Professional II offers a crystallisation of each one. It's great to press the push-push pot to bring in neck and bridge pickup or all three units together, as these are fat and funky tones that we'd use a lot.

Piling on the Lionheart's gain, the guitar remains focused and articulate. There's no wooliness but no piercing treble, either. Anyway, it's simple enough to tweak the bridge pickup's tone control to achieve more Les Paul Deluxe or Firebird-type girth. You could spend many pleasant hours finding out just what a guitar like this is capable of, and it's a lot.

2

2. The neck's pitch is adjustable at the dressed-away heel, via a hole in the 70th Anniversary four-bolt chrome plate. Note too the walnut skunk stripe running down the maple neck

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Verdict

Checking around on the internet it seems that the 70th Anniversary Professional Stratocaster II is available at around £2,000, a little less than its stated price. That's a heck of a lot of guitar for the money, given that a Custom Shop NOS '63 Strat Relic is almost exactly double that. And if the 70th Anniversary thing doesn't particularly grab you, the regular Pro II Strat is a couple of hundred less and you can get it as a lefty, too.

Operationally, the guitar just works. Everything about it is sensible. It's a refinement of Leo's original proposition in every respect and does all that's required of it impeccably. The locking tuners are relevant since there's so much more travel available from the two-point vibrato, the extra pickup selections are a genuine plus point, and not only does the guitar sound incredible, it plays beautifully and looks a million dollars. And what more could any working guitarist want? A very fine guitar indeed.

3. The Pro II's tuners are short-post locking types, relevant here due to the extra travel available from the two-point vibrato with cold-rolled steel block

4. The controls look normal, but the one closest is a push-push that selects middle pickup when positions 1 or 2 are selected, to allow all three or neck and bridge together

FENDER 70TH ANNIVERSARY AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £2,139 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Solid alder with two-piece centre-matched flame maple cap
NECK: Maple, deep C profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.8 mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 241mm (9.5") radius, dot inlays
FRETS: 22, tall narrow
HARDWARE: Upgraded 2-point floating vibrato with cold-rolled steel block, short-post locking tuners, face-mounted jack receptacle, all chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.4mm
ELECTRICS: 3x V-Mod II single coils voiced for position, 5-way blade switch, 1x volume, 2x tones (1x on bridge pickup with push-push pot bringing in neck pickup in positions 1 and 2)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.81/8.4
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: 70th Anniversary range also includes the Player Stratocaster (£959), Antigua Stratocaster (£1,299), 1954 Stratocaster (£2,649), and Ultra Stratocaster HSS (£2,649)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Comet Burst (as reviewed)

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS A genuinely fine representation of a modern Stratocaster; full of sensible refinements; looks, plays and sounds just as good as its professional but inherently fair price-tag suggests

CONS Really nothing, although Leo Fender himself might have suggested Noiseless pickups as the final upgrade

BILL NELSON

The Be-Bop Deluxe icon invites us into his guitar-packed home (with nary an amp in sight) to talk about his endless drive to write and record, and how latest album, *Starlight Stories*, sought inspiration from his inner child

Words Richard Barrett **Photography** Adam Gasson

Bill Nelson is not your average guitar hero. Looking at his extensive back catalogue – from the early solo work, through Be-Bop Deluxe, Red Noise and beyond – shows an artist who maintains a youthful sense of curiosity and a disregard for the categories that can become a creative straitjacket for many. Bill operates outside the mainstream, in a similar way to Jeff Beck or Mike Oldfield in having all the instrumental skills you could wish for but seeking to use these purely for musical expression, rather than as an end in itself. Collaborations with artists such as David Sylvian, Gary Numan, the Skids and Yellow Magic Orchestra, to name just a few, further demonstrate this.

Since 2000, Bill has released an impressive number of albums on his own label, the latest being 2023's *Starlight Stories*, and he's also currently putting the finishing touches to a three-album project under the umbrella title of *Guitars Of Tomorrow*.

Is it true that your latest album, *Starlight Stories*, was inspired by books from your childhood?

"Well, I'm a 'certain age', 76 this year, and you tend to start looking back. I often go back to my youth or childhood and find things that inspired me then that can translate into something creative and musical in the present day. These were books that my mother had as a child. They were thick like a telephone directory and had lots of classic stories in them, by HG Wells and other people. There were classical tales and fairy tales, a real compendium of different things. Those elements of fantasy stuck with me from childhood and I wanted to get something that felt a little bit like that – but without necessarily referencing them directly. It's not so much a direct connection between those books and the music, but they set a process in action that helped the pieces come together."

You're incredibly prolific. Can you talk us through your creative process in the studio?

"I record virtually every day, usually in the evening, rather than the daytime. I like the sort of space that opens up as the world winds down, as it were. I go in without a definite idea usually and start by putting down some drum or percussion tracks and see what happens, see what the next thing should be or could be – that could be a guitar or keyboard part. I've often compared it to decorating an empty room: the first thing you put down is the carpet, then you start moving the furniture in and moving it around till it feels how you want it to feel. The actual tune or song doesn't emerge until a little further into that process. And then the lyrics probably happen last, which is the opposite to how it was way back in the early 70s.

"Back then I had a day job in a local government office, and I used to write the lyrics on scraps of paper then take them home and make the music to them afterwards. The lyrics are now often generated from a title. I have notebooks full of them and a certain title might seem to fit a piece of music better than another one, so the lyrics will develop from that. It's all a little vague until it gets to the latter stages, then you start to understand what you've been getting at and start shaping it into something that has coherence, you know... People read all kinds of things into the lyrics; sometimes they're personal or autobiographical, sometimes they're literally just streams of consciousness."

It sounds as though this process might be described as 'getting out of your own way'...

"It's exactly that. Back in the 1960s I was an art student. I was going to try to be a fine art painter at one point. One of the things we used to do when confronted with a blank canvas was to just start making marks on it, then

Bill Nelson, photographed for *Guitarist* in his home studio, February 2024

those marks turn into something that means something. But there's not necessarily a fixed starting point – just throw some paint at the canvas and see where it goes!"

You draw from a wide variety of influences. Tell us about what inspires your music.

"From an early age I've been exposed to all kinds of music. My father was a jazz saxophonist, so I heard lots of big band/swing music. At my first school they did classical music appreciation, even though we were only five years old! Then The Shadows and Duane Eddy made me want to play the guitar. Then I got into Chet Atkins, Joe Pass, Wes Montgomery.... plus more avant-garde electronic music and so on. I think my playing draws on all those elements, not consciously, but all those things are below the surface and somehow shape what I do."

Are you someone who enjoys using technology in the studio?

"For me, technology gets in the way. I just want to get on with the music. I don't want to be fiddling about with menus for this, that and the other..."

How are you getting your guitar tones in the studio these days?

"I haven't used an amp for years and years. I have got amps here, but to tell you the truth I usually use digital processors. I started with a little Zoom unit, but I've had the DigiTech Valve FX, Line 6 Pod, I've got an Axe-Fx, a new Pod Go.... The one I use the most is a very early Pod. They do differ; the best one for me has the script logo. I bought another as a backup with the oblong logo, which sounds completely different! In fact, there's a mix of a [Be-Bop Deluxe] piece called the *Modern Music Suite* that hadn't made the original album [*Live! In The Air Age*] because of a fault on the guitar cable during the intro. I plugged into the Pod and played around with it to match the tone... We dropped in four or eight bars of the introduction and nobody could tell that I'd done it!"

> "I record virtually every day, usually in the evening. I like the sort of space that opens up as the world winds down"

1. Famously used by Prince, Gus guitars are built in the UK by luthier Simon Farmer. Bill's G1 Midi has an iridescent finish with RMC piezo pickups and a Polydrive system for magnetic, piezo and synth access outputs

2. The Spaceship Transitone from 2010 by Campbell American Guitars features hand-painted retro-style artwork by Nicholas Del Drago

3. Bill's gold sparkle three-pickup Musicvox MI-6 is fitted with a Duesenberg vibrato

After Be-Bop Deluxe, you changed to a more modern direction with Red Noise in the late 70s. What did you feel about the changes in music happening elsewhere at that time, such as punk?

"I remember writing an article about this at the time for the *NME* [laughs]. I thought the spirit was in the right place, but the music wasn't adventurous enough – sort of over-amped Chuck Berry with a snarling vocal over

4. This Gretsch G6136T-62-LTD Limited Edition '62 Falcon is a reissue of the double-cutaway model of that year. Bill remembers seeing Richard Harding of Leeds band The Cresters with an original in the 60s

5. This D'Angelico New Yorker model, which Bill refers to as an NYS-33 designation, was built for the guitarist by the Vestax company in Japan and features decorative appointments including mother-of-pearl inlays on the fretboard and headstock, the latter modelled on the model's namesake hotel

the top. I didn't see that as being anything challenging. Post-punk/new wave got a bit more interesting when other elements came into it musically."

From the 80s, you began collaborating with a wide variety of artists. Do you have any favourite memories?
"Oh gosh, yes. I worked with a very good friend of mine Harold Budd. We did an album in New Orleans at Daniel Lanois' studio back in the 90s. The studio was actually in an old mansion – it wasn't built anything like a studio. All the players, myself included, sat in a circle in the lounge area, surrounded by Mexican Day Of The Dead dolls and candles... The engineer was working on headphones while we recorded and played it back to us through the monitors when we'd finished, so then we really heard what we'd been doing for the first time. That was a special occasion.

"In terms of my own things, there are some albums that I'm more fond of than others. One of them is called *The Alchemical Adventures Of Sailor Bill*. The process of making that was quite intense, but I feel it's one of the better things I've done over the years. When I finish an album and it's released, I tend to forget about it and start on another one straight away. I rarely listen back to my work because all I hear are the things I wish I'd done differently. In the end, you've got to let them go and have a life of their own."

On to gear now – tell us about some of your favourite guitars from your collection.

"It sounds crazy, but I have about 80 guitars and only a small house! I put maybe eight guitars at a time in my studio and I'll play those for a couple of months or so, then I'll swap them around and get another eight out and play those. One that has been used a lot of late is a Gretsch White Falcon. It's a reissue of a 1962 twin-cutaway Falcon; I think only 15 were made. It has the complete '62 spec with the twin string mutes. When I was a teenager, I had the Gretsch catalogue and used to drool over that particular model, so it was great to be able to get one.

"I also have one called an Isana Black Pearl, it's German made. When Elvis was in the army in Germany [from 1958 to '60], his father arranged for him to have one. There are pictures of him in his army uniform playing one of these. It's a reissue; they made eight of them. I use it quite a lot and it's got a really nice sound on the neck pickup – full but a nice 'airiness' to it. Sometimes you can even get a Stratocaster-type tone out of it.

"I've got a Gus guitar that has an unusual finish. It moves from purple to green with a slightly orange tint in it when you move it against the light. It's MIDI-equipped, so I can drive a synth from that.

"Each guitar, because of its looks, will put you in a certain frame of mind, so you'll play differently. The lovely thing about guitars is that they can look so different from each other with weird and wonderful shapes and different colours, whereas a saxophone or a trumpet just looks like a saxophone or a trumpet all the time."

"I have about 80 guitars and only a small house! I put eight in my studio for a couple of months, then I'll swap them around"

6. This Eastwood Astroluxe Custom is a limited-edition signature from 2014. Due to demand, Eastwood later released an Astroluxe Cadet production model that comes with a vibrato option

7. Bill purchased this Guild X-500 archtop in America during the 1970s. It has a fully hollow body and humbucking pickups

8. Another guitar from the 70s is this custom model made in New York by Joe Veillette of Veillette-Citron, which is stereo wired

What about your Gibson ES-345?

"Yes, that was my second electric guitar, bought for me by my father. He had decided I was getting good enough to have a decent guitar. This must have been about 1963. At the time I was a huge Chet Atkins fan and I wanted a Gretsch Country Gentleman. My dad knew someone who had a Gibson 345 and arranged for Kitchens music shop in Leeds [of Kitchen-Marshall fame] to get in a Gibson ES-345 and a Gretsch Country Gentleman for me to try on the condition that they could sell us one of them."

That must have been an exciting day...

"It was! I played the Country Gentleman first and thought, 'This is great!' Then, because my dad had insisted I try the Gibson as well, I picked the 345 up – and as soon as I picked it up it just felt right. I instantly changed my mind. It has stayed with me ever since and I'll never sell it.

9. As an art student of the 60s, Bill uses the analogy of a blank canvas when it comes to writing a song from scratch: "[You] just start making marks... There's not necessarily a fixed starting point – just throw some paint at the canvas and see where it goes!"

10. Bill's Gibson ES-345 was a gift from his father in the early 60s – he had originally wanted a Gretsch Country Gentleman, inspired by Chet Atkins, but once the 345 was in his hands, it won out. It remains a prized possession and rarely leaves his house

It's had some adventures over the years. Once, when I was playing in a teenage band, I grabbed hold of a microphone stand with my other hand on the neck of the guitar... I got this tremendous electric shock and fell off stage. Snow had melted into the building's electrics and made it all live somehow. I came round on the stone floor with people saying, 'Are you okay?' and 'Is your guitar insured?' It was, but had to be sent back to Gibson for a brand-new neck. Then I had it refinished in the 70s and tried taking the pickup covers off, as that was the fashion. It's been through a few changes, but it's still a nice guitar."

You seem to enjoy the 'retro/futuristic' school of guitar design, like your collaboration with Eastwood.
"Yes, I have several of their guitars. One of them you've photographed is the Astroluxe Custom [pictured opposite, far left]. It's one that I designed in collaboration with Eastwood and it's a signature model. Originally, they were only going to produce 12 of them, but there was a demand for more, so I think 25 were produced in the end. It's a pretty special, unusual guitar. It's influenced by the old Wandre guitars but with three Charlie Christian pickups and no cutaway." G

Bill Nelson's latest album, *Starlight Stories*, is available now on independent release
www.billnelson.com

Braced For Impact

Art and innovation combine with Martin's newest acoustic guitar, created with sustainable woods, 'skeletonised bracing' and tone channels cut into the top and back. Intrigued? So were we...

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis

MARTIN INCEPTION MAPLE £4,150

CONTACT: **Westside Distribution** PHONE: **0141 212 0087** WEB: **www.martinguitar.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **This doesn't sound like Martin's traditional fare...**
That's because it was never intended to be. With ecological concerns to the fore and a fearless attitude towards bucking convention, Martin has poured a great deal of R&D into delivering what it considers to be a next evolutionary step in acoustic design.

2. **So, what the heck is a 'skeletonised brace'?**
This is where Martin has added strength to the guitar's top with what is essentially taller bracing, but reduced mass by carving hexagonal shapes into the braces so the 'skeletal' part supports the top.

3. **'Sonic channels' sounds gimmicky. What's the deal?**
The theory is channels – or grooves – at key points under the guitar's spruce soundboard and in the maple/walnut back, allow more flexibility and enhance vibration, with better tone at targeted frequencies and superior resonance from the guitar.

If you go back to our interview in issue 509's *Blueprint* with Fred Greene, Martin's vice president of product development, you'll read that the design of the new Inception guitar was born out of the desire to encourage guitarists away from traditional (and, in many cases, endangered) timbers, while also proving that maple is a contender for superior tone.

Traditionalists will always swerve to avoid this kind of thinking, of course, and cling to the idea that tropical mahogany and various species of rosewood are the only timbers that can deliver the cherished sounds we've all heard for years on established recordings. But the fact is we have to call time on this kind of thinking and find alternative means to achieve a great sound without unnecessary risk to the planet's resources.

So, is Martin's new initiative a way to make maple-bodied instruments impersonate rosewood or mahogany? Well, maybe a little. But it's more about proving that alternative woods have their own characteristic soundprints, too; and many will deliver the goods, even if internet forums still wail to the contrary. After all, Gibson has successfully proved that maple is a contender on its J-200 and so why not?

A black walnut bridge with a compensated Tusq saddle and bone pins sits on a Sitka spruce top

Fred also told us that Martin's R&D team took on the idea that if you're going to change the recipe, you may have to mess with the other ingredients, too. It's not a simple job of making a maple-bodied guitar in the image of an established staple like a D-28. So choosing a body design that doesn't have an established tonal identity of its own was an essential first step. Enter the Grand Performance body shape we see with the Inception.

Naturally there are other design changes along the way – a three-piece back, some latticework in the braces and sound channels in the guitar's top and back to aid flexibility. But we'll come to those a little later on. For now, we'll consider exactly the sum of the parts and work our way to the question everyone is asking: has Martin's bold new experiment worked?

Let's start with the Grand Performance body shape. At a maximum width of 400mm and depth of 113mm it's a fairly chunky beast. At first glance you'd think it's displaying a bit more heft than an OM, but certainly less than a dreadnought, for instance. The graceful cutaway invites players to navigate the dusty end and the satin-finished and slightly faded sunburst wouldn't look out of place in a smokey juke-joint leaning up against a whiskey barrel. There's an aged vibe here, which might be a bit of clever psychology on Martin's part. It looks worn in, ancient and somehow established, like it's been around for decades. You want to pick it up and not bother about the details of its construction.

The top is European spruce, which is straight down the established path of traditional building. The sides are maple, the grain of which is all but hidden under the finish on the sides. But the back is a

1. A set of gold-coloured open-back Grover tuners keep things tuneful at the Inception's sharp end

2. The controls for the LR Baggs Anthem undersaddle pickup and mic combo sit inside the guitar's soundhole

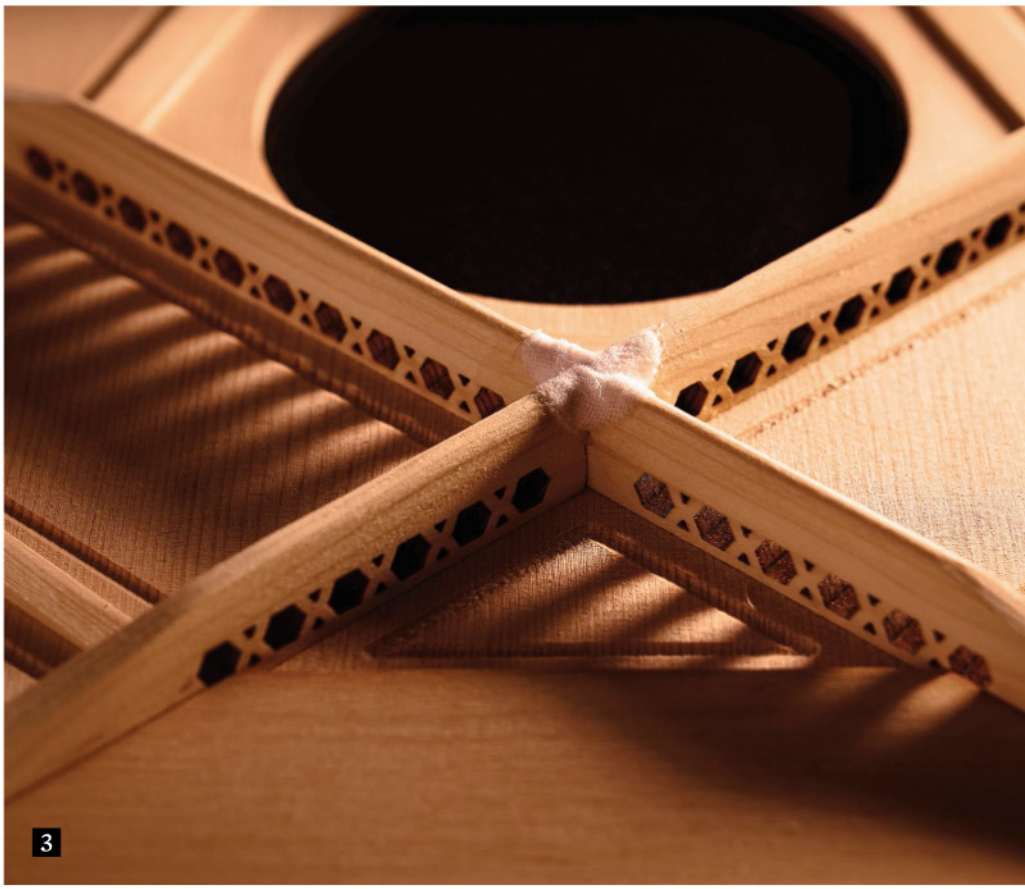
The satin-finished and slightly faded sunburst wouldn't look out of place in a smokey juke-joint

THE RIVALS

If ecological concerns are a high priority when shopping for a new acoustic, there are a few builders out there who are moving away from the more traditional rosewood/mahogany path. Turnstone Guitars, for instance, has been making guitars from all manner of timbers, including fruit tree woods and so on, for many years (as well as using carved-out bracing).

Naturally, bespoke builds are going to infer a heftier price tag and so if off-the-peg is more your thing, then Taylor's K24ce (£5,999), made with responsibly harvested koa, may fit the bill – as would its 'urban woods' range, which uses timber from trees you may recognise for providing shade on the streets of California... The Taylor GTe Urban Ash/ Urban Sienna at £1,529 is a good place to start.

Other than that, you can be sure that other manufacturers are conscious of the green ticket and are putting sustainability high on their priorities – a glance at Gibson, Furch, Faith and so on will provide worthwhile results.



3. The Inception's 'skeletonised bracing' comprises European spruce with a hexagonal lattice pattern to increase stability but keep mass to a minimum. Notice also the 'sonic grooves' for tonal enhancement

4. Maple position markers are inset into the black walnut fingerboard

5. The three-piece back is a combo of figured maple and black walnut

D-35 style three-piece medley of maple and black walnut. In fact, the appearance of the flame on the maple here would also befit a '59 Les Paul – something else that makes you feel instantly at home. According to Fred Greene, the walnut's presence on the back is more than merely decorative. At least part of its brief is to act as a tone control: "You'll see that the actual widest point of the wedge in the back is directly underneath the bridge," he told us. "We were trying to capture some of the sonic tone that comes off the bridge; we know that a lot of the tone that comes from the guitar is right there behind the bridge on the top." Interesting.

Black walnut is a bit of an ongoing theme with the Inception, as this is the timber you'll find on the bridge as well as the neck and fingerboard. Martin's spec has seemingly always read as being 'selected hardwood' for its necks, which we are led to believe means 'probably mahogany' and so walnut's presence here is a bit of a surprise. But again, why not? As a tonewood, black walnut falls between rosewood and mahogany, and has the dark-ish appearance of a rosewood. Most importantly, however, it is in plentiful and non-endangered supply. It also is said to have the density of koa. So, no complaints; let's listen with our ears and not with our eyes on the spec sheet.

Maple inlays along the fretboard add an artistic flair, and the Inception's body furniture is rounded off by a bone nut, Tusq saddle and open-back Grover tuners. There is also an LR Baggs Anthem pickup with the controls mounted on the inside edge of the guitar's soundhole.

A word about the 'skeletonised bracing'. Hidden away under the hood (and only really visible if you look through the soundhole), the bracing has a hexagonal lattice pattern carved into it. This means the top is still sturdily supported, but the mass – and, hence, weight of the guitar – is reduced. Even less obvious are the 'sonic channels' in the back and underside of the top. These present themselves as grooves in the wood at tonally significant points, in order to encourage greater flexibility, allowing the woods to vibrate musically and enrich the natural tone of both maple and spruce. All well and good as a theory, but let's put it to the test and hear what the Inception has to say for itself.

Feel & Sounds

The feel of the neck in the hand is really outstanding, a combination of Martin's 'modified low oval' profile – a kind of very comfortable full C-shape – and the high-performance taper that sees the neck gently increase in width from 45mm at the nut to 54mm at the 12th fret.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARTIN GUITARS

5

MARTIN INCEPTION MAPLE

PRICE: £4,150 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Grand Performance electro-acoustic
TOP: European spruce
BACK/SIDES: Maple with black walnut
MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 400mm
NECK: Black walnut
SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4-inch)
TUNERS: Grover open gear
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Black walnut
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Black walnut/58mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Anthem
WEIGHT (LB/KG): 3.74/1.69
OPTIONS: none
RANGE OPTIONS: The Inception stands pretty much alone as a 'skeletonised brace' acoustic. Other Grand Performance models in the range include the GPC-16E (£2,150), GPC-11E (£1,175) and the GPC-13E (£1,549). See website for more info
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Satin

8/10

PROS: Great feel, good tone and a great amplified voice all combine together in one pioneering instrument

CONS: Traditionalists may be put off by the absence of established tonewoods

It stands up as an example of sustainability, while providing extremely workable tone

The guitar came to us fitted with a set of Martin's Luxe Kovar strings, the wound strings here being a nickel/cobalt alloy, which look more like electric guitar strings rather than acoustic. Initial investigative strums revealed a relatively rich and well-rounded sound with a good balance between the three essential frequency ranges – bass, mids and treble. We would probably be tempted to exchange the string set for phosphor bronze to bring things back onto more familiar territory, but everything is fine here as it is.

Experimenting a bit further, the Inception certainly fits the bill with fingerstyle, bluesy picking and single notes up the neck. Does it have the Martin soundprint? Yes and no. It's very difficult to say what effects the bracing has had over the guitar's sound. It certainly shows some of the characteristics of a maple-bodied instrument as the sound has maple's bright and lively edge, but the exact role the bracing is playing is difficult to determine. Having said that, we were happy to sit with the guitar and play a few tunes for longer than was necessary for this review and that must be saying something.

When we introduced the LR Baggs Anthem into the mix via our AER Compact 60 the Inception really came alive with an amplified sound that would be perfect for anything from an open mic night right up to a performance in a concert hall. All the personality we experienced acoustically was given a far broader soundscape in the electronic arena, indicating that this instrument really does hit the all-rounder mark well.

Verdict

As the quote from the movie *Wayne's World* goes, "We fear change..." and so any modifications made to an established acoustic-building formula are always going to be viewed with a certain amount of reluctance and suspicion. But an open-minded overview of the Inception is that it represents a job very well done.

It's a successful attempt to produce an instrument that stands up as an example of sustainability in terms of natural resources, while providing extremely workable tone and performance. We would encourage anyone in the market for an electro-acoustic to park any prejudices they might have regarding the shock of the new and audition one. You might be in for a surprise.

Modern Times

Gibson's long-running Les Paul Studio is the latest to get a Modern makeover. A valid new model or a minor refresh? Let's find out

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN STUDIO £1,999

CONTACT **Gibson** PHONE **00800 44427661** WEB **www.gibson.com**

What You Need To Know

1 **Modern? We want vintage!**
Ha! Well, not *everyone* wants replicas of 'Bursts, and Gibson offers more vintage-style production models in its Original Collection, of course, not to mention the Custom Shop. The Modern series, meanwhile, is slowly evolving into a more than viable option for those players who want more sounds and slightly more contemporary style and playability.

2 **Where does the Studio fit into Gibson's Les Paul catalogue?**
As the Les Paul Tribute models are outgoing, the Studio slots in as the most cost-effective proper Modern-style Les Paul priced under the Modern, Modern Figured and top-of-the-line Supreme.

3 **What about the Modern Lite and the Les Paul Classic?**
The satin-finished Modern Lite kicks off the series, price wise, but it doesn't have the compound radius ebony 'board or the extra sounds from the pull-switch controls. The gloss-finished Les Paul Classic is still available and has a foot in both camps: standard 60s-style playability but with those extra sounds.

The Les Paul Studio was introduced way back in 1983 and although Gibson missed a significant 40th anniversary last year, it always illustrated the desire for a simplified spec 'Paul at a more affordable price. It's no different today, and while the lowest-cost slot in the Modern strand of Gibson's USA line-up has now been taken by the Modern Lite (£1,499) – which just launched and is really a pretty different Les Paul – the new Modern Studio slots in above that, remaining significantly lower in price than the pukka Les Paul Modern (£2,799).

With so many Les Paul models to manage across the Modern and more vintage-aimed Original Collections, each one needs its own USP. The Modern Studio does share many features with its more expensive brethren and yet it still has its own style. It is, for example, the lowest-cost Les Paul to feature Gibson's pull-push electronics with the Quick Connect pickups.

The Modern Studio also swaps the previous iteration's gloss finish to a four-colour satin choice, without edge binding. But while 'satin' and 'matt' seem to refer to anything that's not glossy, unlike the more

While it's hard to see from any distance, the ebony fingerboard actually has black plastic edge binding. In modern style, the fret ends sit over the binding, which also hides the fret tangs

Classic and classy: the black nickel-plated tuners give a contemporary contrast to the more matt headstock facing. The nut is nicely cut and tuning stability is very good

rudimentary satin of the Modern Lite we looked at back in issue 507, the satin here is beautifully silky smooth over the maple top – some might call it a low gloss – and it's only slightly more textured on the back, sides and a little more open-pore on the neck back. In our book, this is a proper satin. Our Red Wine Satin is translucent, too, and we have what appears to be a two-piece centre-joined back, a centre-joined plain maple top and one-piece neck. Also, the top colour seems slightly darker than the sides and back, and means the edge of the maple top is more noticeable, almost like a semi-faux binding.

As on the Modern, Modern Figured and Supreme models we have the Ultra-Modern weight relief, and the ebony fingerboard ties in with the new-Modern style and replaces the rosewood of that outgoing Studio, bound with a black plastic (rather than contrasting cream plastic). It also features the unspecified compound radius of the upmarket Moderns – which we measured at 241mm to 305mm (9.5 to 12 inches) – but not the Modern Lite, or indeed the Les Paul Classic, which both retain Gibson's standard 305mm (12-inch) camber.

While the Nashville bridge, lightweight aluminium tailpiece and (non-locking) Grover Rotomatic tuners are standard Gibson fare, here they come in a rather fitting, modern-looking black nickel plating. The pickups and controls remain the same as on the previous Studio.

Feel & Sounds

With respect to the lightweight and 45mm-thick Modern Lite, the Modern Studio feels like a *proper* Les Paul. As per the Studio recipe, it's slightly thinner in overall depth at 57mm and measures 46mm at the rim, compared with the full-fat 62mm/50mm dimensions of the Les Paul Modern Figured we got to measure in issue 507. With that weight relief, we have a very manageable guitar that weighs in at 3.81kg (8.38lbs). The lack of contrasting edge binding and the satin finish does project a bit of a cut-price vibe, but to our eyes it's noticeably classier than the Modern Lite.

> With respect to the lightweight Modern Lite, the Modern Studio feels like a proper Les Paul

Adding to the familiarity is the SlimTaper 60s-style neck profile that sits nicely between thick and thin, here with a nut width of 43.4mm, and 20.5mm at the 1st fret and 23mm at the 12th, with a pretty mainstream-feeling shallow C profile. Another change is the reduced-depth contoured heel that subtly improves upper-fret comfort. You might have to look twice before you notice the black fingerboard

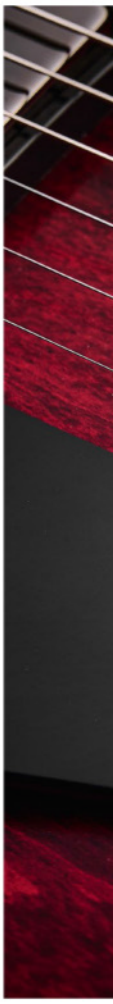
THE RIVALS

There's plenty of choice for single-cut style guitars. Here in the UK, the long-running Gordon Smith has its Graduate model, which kicks off at £1,499 and can be custom-spec'd to your own taste. Also check out the new Grande (£1,999), which we reviewed in our last issue.

PRS has just announced its new USA-made S2 models that are upgraded with USA pickups. The new McCarty 594 Singlecut (£2,675) is higher in price than the Studio, but comes in gloss nitro and now features 58/15 LT humbuckers, with partial coil-splits, which will give the Les Paul Modern and Modern Figured a run for their money.

Godin's Canadian-made electric guitars certainly have a modern vibe, including the Summit Classic HT model (£1,549), which comes in semi-gloss finished colours, uses a chambered Laurentian basswood body with carved maple top, and silver leaf maple set neck with rosewood 'board, and features Godin humbuckers and the High Definition Revoicer (HDR) active circuit.

ESP's Eclipse has long been a modern-aimed take on the Les Paul with a huge range of models and specifications from around £400 upwards.



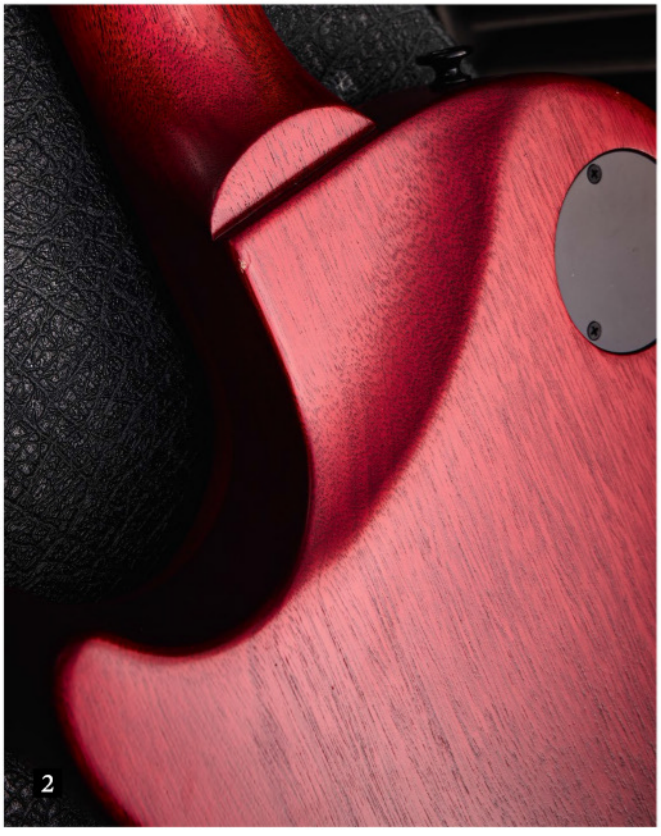
1. The bridge-position 'Hot Alnico' 498T is the same as the current Studio. Aside from different plating, the hardware doesn't change, either

2. Now featured on all the Modern Les Paul models (except the Modern Lite), this slightly contoured heel certainly reduces the bulk of the vintage-style heel, along with a thinner overall depth

edge binding, but in contrast to the vintage style, the fret ends sit *over* the binding, with the tangs notched and hidden by the black plastic strip. There's a little edge rolling but also a slight 'edge' where the finish stops and the binding starts. Overall, though, while we might prefer slightly more fret-end rounding, as supplied it was nicely set up with only very slight relief and a pretty low 'fast' action. Of course, gurning blues-benders might need a bit more air to the setup, but that's easily achieved.

The Modern Studio uses the same pickups as the Modern Lite – though these are covered – and while the Modern Lite has traditional wiring, the Studio sticks with the four pull-push pots, meaning we have the capacitor-filtered 'coil taps' for each pickup on their respective volume controls. When pulled up the neck's tone puts the pickups out of phase, while pulling up the bridge pickup's tone sends the bridge pickup direct to output.

Overall, this Modern Studio has a lot going for it. It's lighter in weight than our reference Les Paul Classic and the combination of the subtle depth reduction, not to mention the different weight relief, all seem to work in its favour. And whether

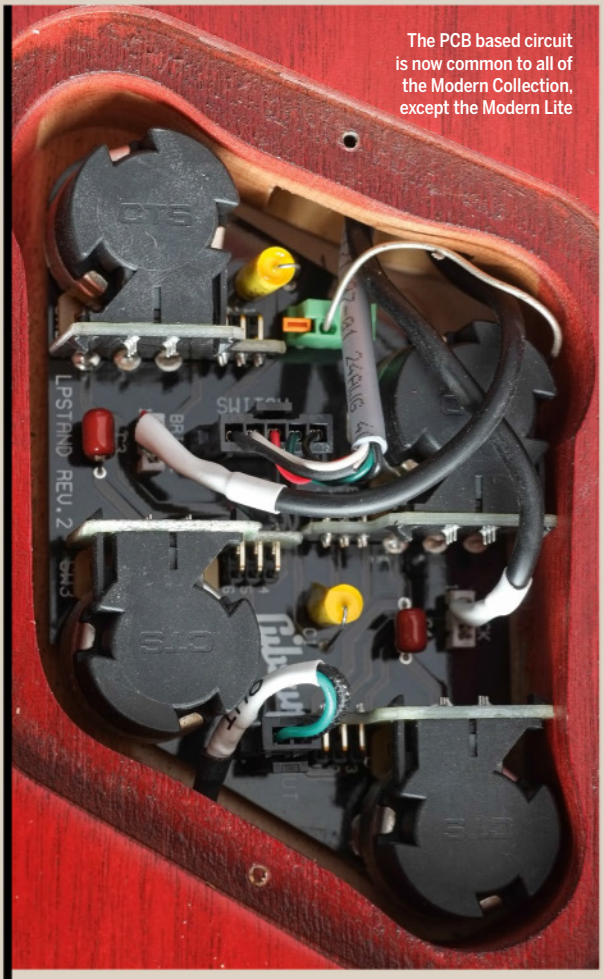


3. The maple top is visible through the semi-transparent satin finish, adding a further touch of class to the guitar's overall appeal

or not that thin finish is helping the sounds we hear (we have no science to back that up!), there's a juicy warmth to the overall voice that sounds played in, if there is such a thing. Those 'coil taps' are relatively subtle, just scooping a little of the upper midrange snap and slightly softening the high-end. With some crunchy gain, for example, it's almost like you've pulled back a wah pedal slightly and pulled down the resonant peak

Whether or not that thin finish helps, there's a juicy warmth to the voice that sounds played in

a little. It means in combination with the two volumes there's plenty of shading out of phase beyond the thin and hollow; some real character emerges with the taps in play and volume adjustment. As ever, the direct output switch emphasises the sizzle of the bridge with a slight uplift in output. Swapping between various other single-cuts, the Studio doesn't feel deficient in any way – it's a really good resonant ride, nicely balanced between thick and creamy, and bright and clear.



The PCB based circuit is now common to all of the Modern Collection, except the Modern Lite

UNDER THE HOOD

Not everyone likes the PCB-mounted control circuit, but it's a key feature of the Modern Collection

With the exception of the Les Paul Modern Lite, all the Les Pauls in the current Modern Collection use the same PCB circuit board, which we last discussed back in issue 507. To recap, it's a tidily done system using four modern CTS pull-switch pots, while the pickups, pickup selector toggle switch and output jack all push-fit to the PCB that also houses the caps: .022µF for the tone controls and .01µF used to simply filter one coil of each humbucker to provide the 'coil-tap' switching. There's no actual coil-tap or coil-split involved because the DCR doesn't change when you pull up the 'coil-tap' switches, although when you pull up the pure bypass switch on the bridge pickup, it changes to a higher reading.

Unlike the Modern Lite, which uses the same 490R (neck) and 498T (bridge) 'buckers, these are covered but don't seem overly potted. The 490R uses an Alnico II magnet and has a DCR of 7.68k measured at output, very much in the vintage ballpark. The 'Hot Alnico' 498T has an Alnico V magnet with a measured DCR of 13.66k (which rises to 14.05k with the bypass switch pulled up) and we suspect a thinner coil wire.

4. They look normal enough, but each of the classic controls has a second function via its pull-push switched pots. More sounds if you need them!

With the soft-shell case, it's a shoo-in for any gigging musician, not least with its non-precious satin finish

Verdict

Gibson calls this new Studio model a "no-nonsense, high-performance tone machine", and we can't disagree. With the lighter weight soft-shell case, it's a shoo-in for any gigging musician, not least with its non-precious satin finish that will begin to wear after a few gigs. And while its electrics haven't been upgraded on this new version, you can't help thinking, well, if it ain't broke... Here's a 'Paul that's more Slash than Peter Green, but don't forget Gibson's Pickup Shop is about to offer Quick Connect pickups (initially, the '57 Classics and Dirty Fingers), so revoicing the guitar, while retaining those extra sounds from the pull-push pots, is a simple no-solder process. As we've said before, you don't have to use those extra sounds, but they're there if you need them: a slightly different flavour from the 'coil taps', out-of-phase, or that direct out 'solo' switch. A nice array of 'secret' weapons.

It's tidily done, too, and is a rather good Les Paul for the working musician. Yes, it's more expensive than the outgoing Studio, but a shade under £2k for the real thing ain't bad in our book. G

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN STUDIO

PRICE: £1,999 (inc soft case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with carved maple top and Ultra Modern weight relief
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, SlimTaper profile with contoured heel, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Black bound ebony, acrylic trapezoid inlays, measured 241-305mm (9.5-12") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Grover Rotomatic w/ keystone buttons – black nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: Covered Gibson 490R (neck) and 498T (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup each with pull-switches for coil-tap, phase and bypass
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.85/8.47
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See gallery over the page
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISHES: Wine Red Satin (as reviewed), Worn White, Smokehouse Satin, Manhattan Midnight satin (£1,899) – satin nitrocellulose

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Valid refresh of long-running model; proper satin finish; good weight; new Modern features like ebony 'board and contoured heel; expansive sounds with pull-switch functions

CONS A few fret ends were a little sharp but very little to worry about here

The Modern World

Vintage buffs can turn the page – the Modern Collection is now a near fully formed range. What's your poison?

Words Dave Burrluck

GIBSON LES PAUL LITE £1,499

Priced the same as the high-end Epiphone models, such as the Kirk Hammett 'Greeny' 1959 Les Paul Standard, the Lite is a very stripped-back thin-bodied LP with a standard-radius rosewood fingerboard. There are no pull-push switched extra sounds here, but the uncovered 490R (neck) and 498T (bridge) humbuckers deliver a vibey hot-vintage voice.

GIBSON SG MODERN £2,399

This pimped SG-meets-LP adds an AA maple top to the time-honoured recipe and is available in Blueberry and Trans Blade Fades. We get an asymmetrical SlimTaper neck profile, compound radius ebony 'board and 24 frets. It's powered by Alnico V Burstbucker Pro (neck) and Pro+ (bridge) covered 'buckers with the pull-push switched circuit. Modern? Positively space age!

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN FIGURED £2,999

You want flame maple? You got it! The top here is AAA grade in three translucent hues: Seafoam Green, Cherry Burst and Cobalt Burst. Like all the Modern Les Pauls from the Studio up, we get the Ultra-Modern weight relief here, plus the unifying ebony fingerboard, Modern Contoured Heel for easy access to those upper frets, expanded sounds and the same Burstbucker pairing of Pro in the neck position and Pro + at the bridge.

GIBSON LES PAUL CLASSIC £2,399

The internet tells us this Les Paul is out of production, but Gibson doesn't. Either way, there's reasonable in-store stock and we reckon this one is a bit of a sleeper. All the Modern sounds are here with Quick Connect zebra-coiled '61 Burstbuckers but with standard-radius rosewood fingerboard and some old-school colours, such as this Heritage Cherry Sunburst.

GIBSON LES PAUL MODERN £2,799

The Les Paul Modern ditches the classic flamed maple style with three opaque top colours – Graphite, Sparkling Burgundy and Faded Pelham Blue. Other than that we get all the modern sauce: asymmetrical SlimTaper neck, contoured heel, compound radius ebony 'board, and Burstbucker Pro (neck) and Pro+ (bridge) covered humbuckers with the pull-push action.

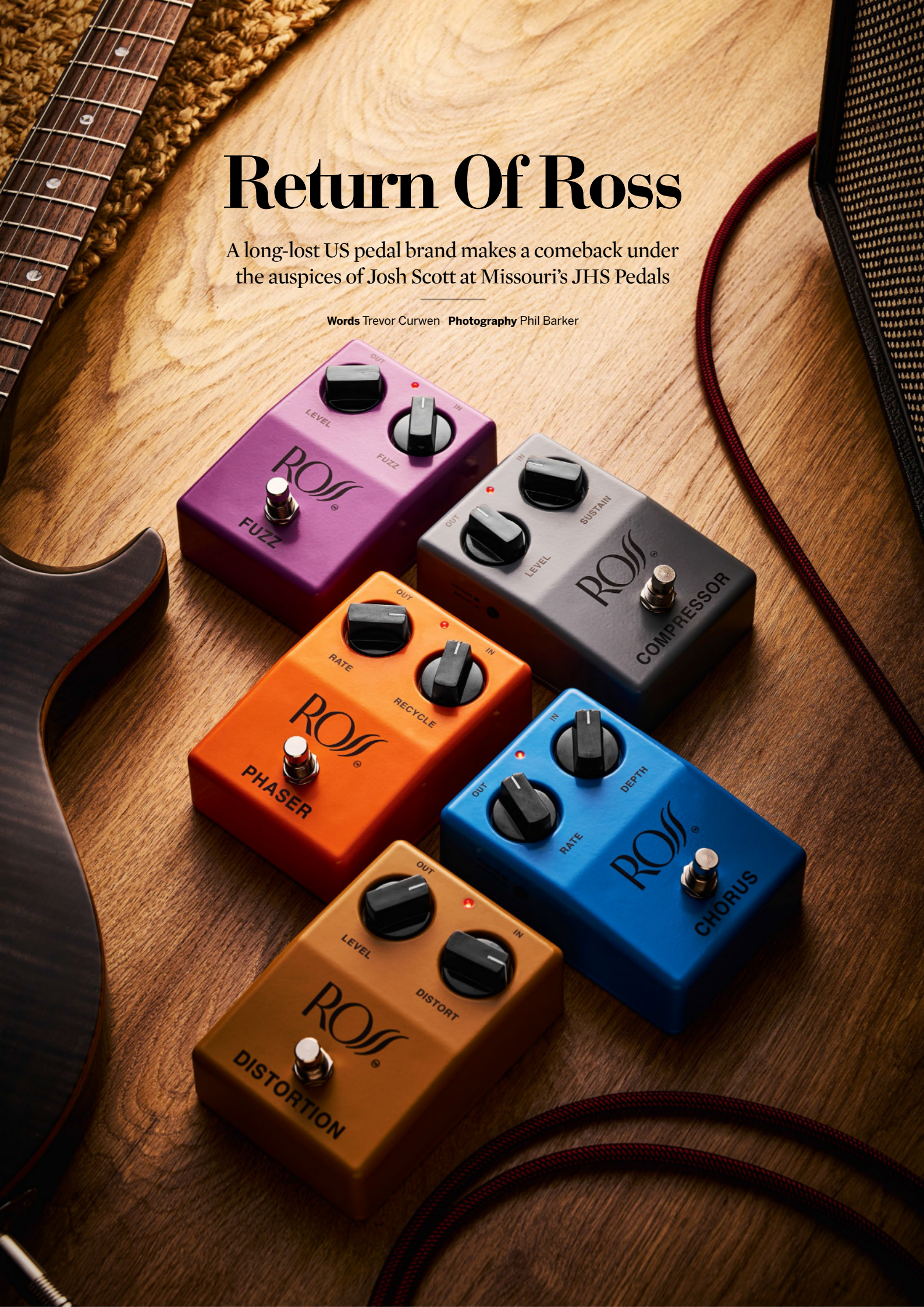
GIBSON LES PAUL SUPREME £3,999

The Supreme takes the Modern Figured mould and adds a little bling, particularly evident in the four colour options: Fireburst, Translucent Ebony Burst, Wine Red and Ebony (with plain maple top and three humbuckers). Then there are the split-block mother-of-pearl fingerboard inlays and a new headstock inlay, "inspired by a design from the 1940s that was discovered in the Gibson archives", says the brand.

Return Of Ross

A long-lost US pedal brand makes a comeback under the auspices of Josh Scott at Missouri's JHS Pedals

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker



ROSS PEDALS £189 EACH

CONTACT **Sound Affects** WEB **www.rosselectronics.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **Ross? Never heard of them...**
The brand had been defunct for a very long time and was never a massive presence in the UK. But now it's back and available here.

2. **Why the return now?**
Pedal aficionado Josh Scott at JHS Pedals thought it would be a good idea and took on the design and manufacture of the revived brand, with the new Ross pedals being manufactured at JHS Pedals' facility in Kansas City, Missouri.

3. **Are these exact copies of the vintage pedals?**
Not exactly, there are differences, although the distinctive look has been retained, albeit with the socketry now placed in a 'board-friendly top-end position, rather than on the sides of the pedals.

It's probably fair to say that Ross pedals didn't take off in a big way here in the UK. Sure, they were around in the late 1970s alongside other US brands' units such as Electro-Harmonix, MXR and DOD, but they never really captured the imagination in the way that the Boss compact range did, which launched around the same time. Ross pedals were the brainchild of Bud Ross of Kustom, whose amps had an unmistakable padded or quilted look and were used by several big bands of the era, notably Creedence Clearwater Revival. Unlike those distinctive amps, though, the first pedals were far from original and legal action threatened by MXR led the company to come up with its own distinctive enclosures in 1978, featuring knobs that were recessed into the metal chassis.

The pedal line continued with production moving from the USA to Taiwan in the early 1980s until the demise of the brand. Cameron Ross (Bud's grandson) tried to revive the brand as Ross Audibles in 2019, but it was a partnership in 2020 with Josh Scott of JHS Pedals that really got the current ball rolling, resulting in the release of five pedals last year. Of the five, the Distortion, Phaser and Compressor are said to replicate the circuitry of the 70s US-built pedals, while the Chorus is based on a later Taiwan-made pedal. The Fuzz is a bit of an anomaly as it's not based on any previous pedal, taking its circuitry from a 1960s Kustom amplifier.

While the pedals channel a vintage vibe with their large enclosures, they now have their sockets and power inputs at the top end of the enclosure, and bypass is via a soft-touch footswitch. The knobs may have the same functions as the original pedals, but there are extra sound variations courtesy of a small push-switch on each pedal's left cheek, allowing access to two different modes.

Not Just A Phaser

Looking at the bright orange phaser, it's hard not to think 'MXR', but this Ross unit has its own nifty trick in that it has a switch that changes it from being a straight phaser to putting out Uni-Vibe-style sounds. The

The recessed knobs are a sleek feature that has been retained from some of the original Ross pedals from the late 70s

This push-switch on the side of the Chorus pedal gives you access to two modes. And while the position of the connections means you could place these pedals cheek to cheek with others, you'd have to leave a bit of room to access this switch

phasing here is controlled by the Rate knob and a Recycle knob, which would probably be called Feedback or Regeneration elsewhere, that sends some signal back to the input.

Keeping the Recycle at minimum, the phasing runs through a range similar to an MXR Phase 90, from a long slow sweep to a fast warble. It's typical vintage phasing with a pleasant warmth to the sound and clear

Of them all, it is the Compressor that reached near iconic status, with originals going for a premium

top-end. Bringing in the Recycling knob increases the intensity of the effect so the whole cyclical movement becomes more obvious, and the increased resonance makes the 'wow' of the effect more prominent. The Uni-Vibe setting is a practical bonus that offers a passable flavour of the real thing and sits well with dirt pedals.

Dual-Voice Fuzz

Ross Pedals had no fuzz box in its previous lifetime, so this particular example takes some circuitry from a vintage Kustom amp and delivers it via Level and Fuzz knobs in a choice of two modes, Vintage and Modern. From the minimum setting of the Fuzz knob, what the pedal puts out is a nice edgy distortion until it gets to about three o'clock and then you are into full-on fuzz. While there is no tone knob on this pedal, its voicings have been nicely chosen for contrast. Vintage is grainy and pokes through in the upper mids, and we had fun playing Tony Peluso's fuzzed-out solo from the Carpenters' *Goodbye To Love* with it; Modern is instantly louder, fuller and brighter. Both are eminently usable and clean up well when needed.

Historic Compressor

If any of the Ross pedals has gained anything near iconic status, then it is the Compressor. Original examples now command a premium price and it's the pedal that many manufacturers use as a basis for their own models. A lot of that kudos is down to one being used by Trey Anastasio of Phish back in the 90s, but basically the Ross compressor draws on an MXR Dynacomp with some circuit modifications.

Compression is turned up by the Sustain knob, the action of which basically sets the threshold where compression starts working, and Level sets the output volume. The no-nonsense two-knob layout is great for quick setup – while there's no attack and decay to tweak, the built-in values are well chosen and work really well with guitar. It's great for a clean boost, some smooth levelling or a more potent squish and sustain. A Bright switch gives you a more cutting pokey sound as a choice, but could be a necessity if you have a darker-sounding guitar or amp.

Double Distortion

The original Ross distortion pedal was derived from the MXR Distortion Plus and its hard-clipping diode circuitry. This new version, however, covers different iterations of the Ross with a choice of Silicon or Germanium via the side-panel switch. Level and Distort knobs dial in the dirt, which starts at a just-breaking-up drive and does the whole raunchy amp thing.

The classy dual-knob format of the footswitches and the pedals' simple colourways enhance the straightforward, timeless look of this series

Apparently derived from the distortion/fuzz circuit in a Kustom amp, the Fuzz's Vintage setting will give you some John Fogerty CCR flavour. *Green River*, anyone?

THE RIVALS

For the Compressor, take a look at the Analog Man CompROSSor (from $190), and the Wampler Ego Mini (£139) offers a lot in a smaller chassis. Walrus Audio's Lillian (£189) is a versatile phaser and the brand also has the Julia V2 chorus pedal (£199), though you can't go wrong with a Boss CE-2W (£207) for classic chorus sounds. The MXR Distortion Plus (£99) and DOD Overdrive Preamp 250 (£99) should put you in the same ballpark as the Ross Distortion, and for less outlay. Fuzz is arguably a more personal choice, but the multi-voiced fuzz Walrus Audio Eons fuzz (£235) should cover your options.

The tone is nicely balanced and sits in a frequency range that shouldn't deviate too much from your rig's usual sonics, but the switch on the side does offer variations on the voice – Silicon is louder and brasher, while the Germanium has a little more give in terms of playing feel.

Chorus Line

This is a typical two-knob analogue chorus pedal in the vein of the Boss CE-2, sporting similar Rate and Depth knobs, and it has a bright-sounding chorus effect with plenty of range: turn up the rate, set the depth to taste and there's a practical fast rotary speaker sound. The two-for-one bonus is that you also get a Vibrato mode via the switch on the pedal's side that removes the dry portion of the sound.

Verdict

These Ross reissues are a decent bunch of pedals that all do their appointed job well. Due to its reputation, we expect the Compressor to end up on quite a few 'boards, and while the rest do face stronger competition, they're strong choices with the advantage of dual modes. G

The Phaser will give you a typical 70s phase sound with plenty of chewy resonance to be added by the Recycle knob. Flip the side switch for faux Uni-Vibe sounds with adjustable speed

ROSS PHASER

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Phaser pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Rate, Recycle, Phaser/Univibe switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 42mA
DIMENSIONS: 89 (w) x 130 (d) x 55mm (h)

8/10

ROSS FUZZ

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Fuzz, Vintage/Modern switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 46mA
DIMENSIONS: 89 (w) x 130 (d) x 55mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

ROSS COMPRESSOR

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Compressor pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Sustain, Vintage/Bright switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 37mA
DIMENSIONS: 89 (w) x 130 (d) x 55mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

ROSS DISTORTION

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Distortion pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Distort, Germanium/Silicon switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 40mA
DIMENSIONS: 89 (w) x 130 (d) x 55mm (h)

8/10

ROSS CHORUS

PRICE: £189
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Chorus pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Rate, Depth, Chorus/Vibrato switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor 47mA
DIMENSIONS: 89 (w) x 130 (d) x 55mm (h)

8/10

PROS Cool vintage look; good sound quality; soft-touch switching; the two modes add flexibility

CONS Push-in side switch is a bit fiddly; some users would probably prefer more than two knobs

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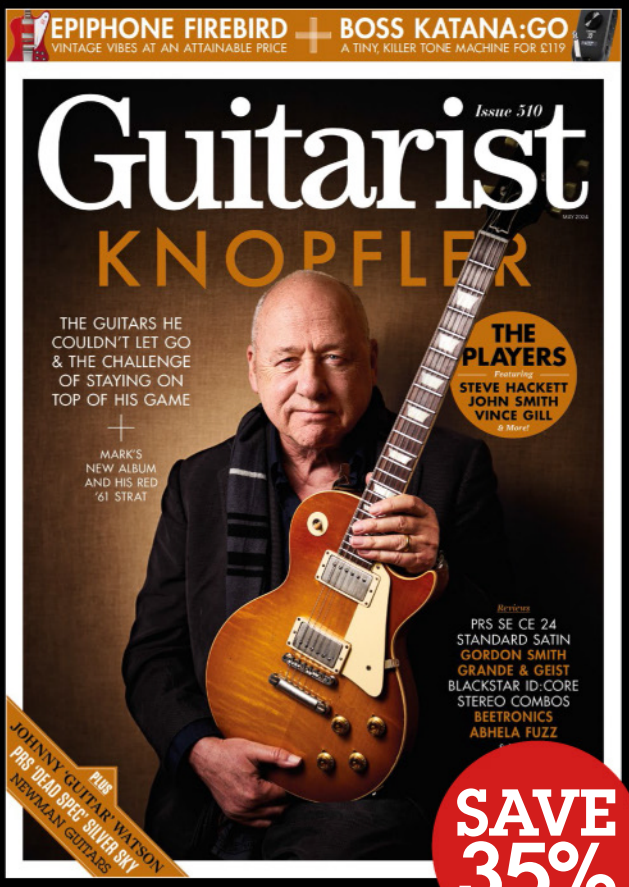

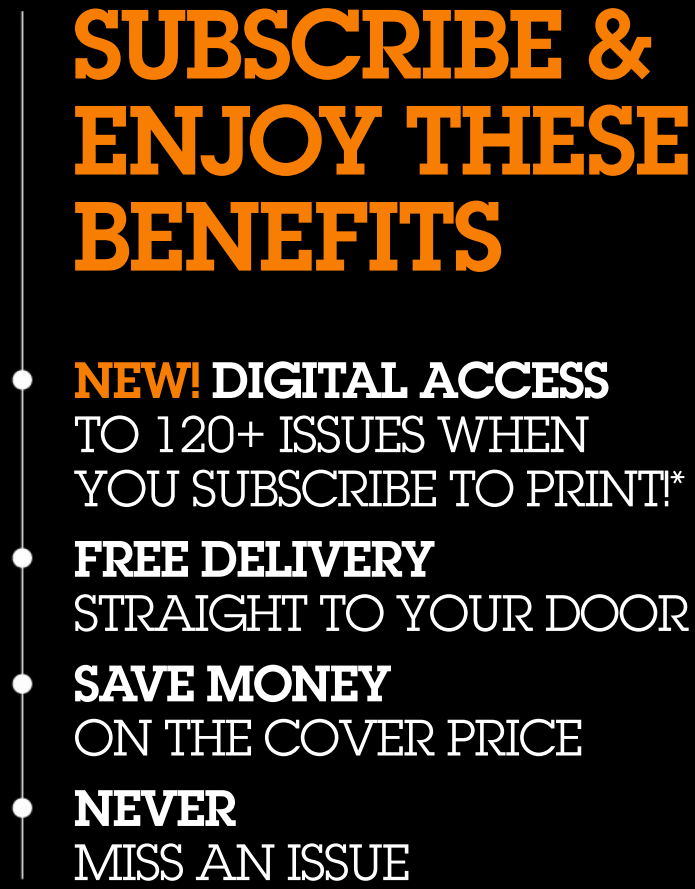

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Alex Lifeson and his Lerxst family of amps alongside his Epiphone Les Paul models

« BLUEPRINT »

LIFE FORCE

After decades of honing his sound with Rush, Alex Lifeson has joined forces with Mojotone to produce a series of amplifiers, hand-built in the USA, that offer up his acclaimed tone to the masses

Words Charlie Wilkins **Photography** Richard Sibbald

Nearly a decade after the band's farewell tour, Rush's music continues to resonate with millions. But for guitarist Alex Lifeson, the journey doesn't end there. With a flourishing side project called Envy Of None, and Lerxst – an amplifier, guitar and pedal line launched in partnership with Mojotone of Burgaw, North Carolina – Lifeson shows no signs of slowing down. We sit down with the legendary musician and Mojotone CEO Michael McWhorter to discuss their collaboration and creative process on the Lerxst amplifiers, along with Lifeson's enduring love for the craft and what the future holds for one of rock's most iconic figures.

Alex, how did the Lerxst brand get started and how did you develop a partnership with Mojotone to build the amps?
Alex Lifeson: "My recollection is that Geddy [Lee]'s tech had already been working with Mojotone on pickups and accessories. When we recorded the *Clockwork Angels* album [released in 2012] I used a Marshall Silver Jubilee. I really liked it and I used it for a lot of the record. After we finished recording, I thought, 'I gotta find one of these,' but there were very few out there and no-one wanted to sell. So I approached Michael for help with finding one and he said that Mojotone could build whatever I wanted. I said, 'That's awesome!' I felt that the Jubilee would be a great platform and starting point to build from but maybe soften the top-end a little bit and round out the mids. So they built the amp and I used it for all the consecutive Rush tours."

Michael, tell us about the creative process.
Michael McWhorter: "I was a die-hard Rush fan since sixth grade so when Alex asked, 'Hey, can you do this?', the answer was immediately, 'Of course!' This is without talking to any of my build crew first [laughs]. When Alex made suggestions, like 'more mids' or 'more mid-sweep control', or some other subtle things, everyone on our crew, who are also all die-hard Rush

Mojotone CEO Michael McWhorter collaborated on the Lerxst amps

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOJOTONE

fans, were eager to jump on it. It was an easy process working with Alex, and I thoroughly enjoyed it all the way through."

Alex: "The Omega and Chi models have been around for several years, but we decided on a cosmetic change that looks really sexy to me. They look very elegant and really stand out compared with a lot of other amps out there – more traditional and not super wild. Michael also has some ideas to do hand-wired versions. Now we've come to a point, all these years later, where we're looking at a whole group of new products to run in the Lerxst line. I'm really proud of the amps. From the very beginning, I didn't want to stick my name on something just to sell more. These amps are really what I wanted them to be."

Talk us through the spec and features of the Lerxst amps.

Michael: "The Omega is a 50-watt head that runs on a pair of EL34s, is switchable down to 25 watts, and has two channels with a Master Volume and Effects Loops. It's British voiced with a unique LED gain stage that Marshall kind of introduced back in the 80s. It really gives a more direct, pointed, distortion sound.

"The Chi is a 30-watt combo with a similar gain structure, but it's not just an 'Omega Junior'. It runs on a pair of 6L6s, which are obviously different from EL34s, so it has a different kind of headroom. You can really hear all six strings when you play a big Alex Lifeson chord. Even with the gain all the way up, all six strings are very defined. Both amps sound similar, but the lower-wattage Chi is really its own thing. It's a cousin, rather than a child."

> "With the Chi, you can really hear all six strings when you play a big Alex Lifeson chord"
>
> ***Michael McWhorter***

1

2

3

1. The 30-watt Chi amp comes in combo and head (right) formats, powered by a pair of 6L6 valves

2. The Omega cabinet is modelled on Nick Raskulinecz's 1972 Marshall 2069 4x12 that Alex used on Rush's *Clockwork Angels* album

3. The Omega head is switchable between 50 and 25 watts and runs on two EL34s for that quintessential 'British' sound

Alex, do you use both models?

Alex: "Yeah, I have an Omega right here and a Chi just right around the corner. I used the Chi on a gig not too long ago with Andy Kim. He does a Christmas show here in Toronto every year, so I've been doing that gig for about 12 years. They normally supply an amp for me, but this time around I took the Chi and it sounded great. I'm an old man now, but it was easy to carry around.

"I'll also echo Michael's response about the Chi: you hit a chord and you hear everything. With some amps, depending on how you're pushing the mids, the top-end gets a little wonky or a little invisible, but the Chi is equal all the way through. I was really impressed because it was the first time I used it in a live situation. It was a really good experience for me to actually get it out and use it in that environment."

Michael: "The first Chi design we sent to Alex had 6V6s. He liked it but asked if we could make it sound more open. 6L6s seemed to be the obvious route to give it more headroom and make it brighter and more open. There's really nothing like a 6L6 to open things up."

How did the development process work between yourself, Alex, and Mojotone?

Alex: "With everything that we work on, Michael will send me something – whether it's an amp or pedal, or whatever it is – and I'll live with it for a period of time and try to use it in many different environments or situations to get a pretty comprehensive take on what's happening. Then I would usually send it back and give my comments. Then the next iteration would arrive and I would do the same thing until we finally had it nailed."

Tell us more about the power scaling feature on the amps.

Michael: "It's a switch that brings the 50 watts down to 25 watts and lets you go from stage to bedroom. You don't really lose much going down to 25 watts. Alex, I think with your live rig, you were playing the Omega at 25 watts, right?"

Alex: "Yes, I was. I think if you have the levels set in the right place, it gives you all of that, you know, at a lower volume. It is a little spongier, not compressed, but very limited in a way. But when you crank it up, you can still get all that dimension and it may come very close to having the full wattage characteristics."

And you also have matching cabinets.

Michael: "Yeah, we have an oversized 4x12 cabinet for the Omega that's pretty fun. It's loaded with Mojotone BV-25M speakers. There's also a 2x12 cabinet loaded with the BV-25s. The Chi comes in a head and a combo [format]. We're using a 12-inch Mojotone Greyhound in the combo, which is a 70-watt speaker and a really good pairing. I can't remember how many different speaker combinations and variations we went through and landed

"I wanted something that had that classic British sound – a clean channel in the front-end that had body and clarity. That was paramount for me"

Alex Lifeson

on that one. Not just because it was a Mojotone speaker, but because we thought it sounded the best. Ultimately, Alex had the final vote, of course."

Alex: "They sent me tons of cabinets and I went through them all. I have to say that the tall 4x12 cabinet sounds fantastic. Last year when we did the Taylor Hawkins tribute, Dave Grohl and Omar Hakim came up from Los Angeles to rehearse with Geddy and me for a couple days. So I had that cabinet and my Omega and I was just blown away by how awesome it sounded.

"With Rush, because of the staging requirements, we didn't have cabinets on stage. We had props, reflecting that period in the tour so I used a Palmer speaker simulator, mostly. I liked it because it gave me consistency: night after night, it sounded exactly the same. It's so variable with a mic in front of a speaker cabinet, depending on humidity, temperature, all of those things can affect it. The Palmers gave me exactly the same sound all the time.

> "The Omega is British voiced with a unique LED gain stage [for] a more direct, pointed, distortion sound"
>
> ***Michael McWhorter***

4. A neat carry handles assists in lifting the 20kg (44lb) Omega head, while its lighter Chi sibling clocks in at 15kg (33lb)

5. The Omega features on Alex's latest Envy Of None project where he's exploring 'un-guitar-like' sounds

6. The team of "die-hard Rush fans" at Mojotone nailed Alex's requests for the Lerxst amps

As Brad [Madix], our front-of-house guy, got to know my sound and expectations, my sound just got better and better because he had that consistency to work with. So it was a treat for me to actually hear that cabinet in more of a live situation.

"Here in my studio, I have an isolation cabinet with a single 12-inch speaker that I run all my different amps through and it sounds brilliant. I'm so totally sold on the difference between plug-ins and a mic in front of a speaker. Plug-ins are great because they're so convenient and there are so many variables – you can have a lot of fun creating things. But they sound like, you know, it's pasted on your monitor screen. As soon as you get a 57 or 421 in front of a 12-inch speaker, boy... Now you hear dimension, you hear the sizzle on the outside. It is such a big difference. Why would you ever use a plug-in? Other than it's quick and easy if you're doing a demo or something."

When you guys were in development, did you consider a design that would cater to both classic and modern tones?

Alex: "I don't know what 'modern tone' means exactly. My requirement was that I wanted something that had that classic British sound. I basically wanted a clean channel in the front-end that had body and clarity. That was paramount for me because my experience with a lot of amps has been that the clean end was never quite the way I heard it in my head. It tended to be a little skinny and just not warm. It's really down to those two channels: a dirty and a clean. Then you can manipulate whatever you want with your effects or whatever. You can shape it in a myriad of ways, but the basic foundation has to be body and clarity.

"On the dirty side, I wanted something crunchy, but if I rolled it off a little bit on the guitar I can get clarity in the rhythm playing, then pull it up and give that little boost for soloing with sustain and creaminess. It sounds kind of simple and trite, but my requirements were very, very basic and we accomplished that."

Alex, have you moved away from rack-mounted gear? What does your rig look like now?

Alex: "Well, it's certainly not what it was when we were touring. I think I've gone back to more of a traditionalist approach with a short cable into the front-end of the amp. I've really come to appreciate that, after using radios [wireless] for so many years just out of necessity and convenience. Cable makes such a big difference in the way the guitar is speaking to the amp; you feel more connected. I use some pedals, but generally I like to record everything direct and then add plug-ins or whatever. If I'm doing a live gig, I'll take a delay pedal and maybe a chorus.

"I had such an addiction to chorus that I'm trying to avoid it as much as I can. It started with the Roland JC-120 on *A Farewell To Kings*. In the studio when we were finished recording, I would just sit in front of that amp, maybe had a little puff of something, and just play in front of this beautiful shifting Stereo Chorus that was mindblowing. That's when my addiction started and it was a little overwhelming. I used chorus on everything for most of the 80s."

The chorus really shaped your tone and it sounds great.

Alex: "Yeah, Andy Summers would not complain [laughs]."

Did you use the JC-120s on stage?

Alex: "No, as soon as the first chorus unit came out, it was the CE-1 – the big one.

That's what I used and I still have it. It's 48 years old or something and it still works and sounds amazing."

Alex, your tone has evolved so much over the years with Rush, and then with side projects like Envy Of None where you're going in a completely different direction. Do the Lerxst amps cover all the sonic ground that you need when you play live?

Alex: "I'm not playing live much any more, but I did use the Omega on the last couple Rush tours. I'm probably using my Omega for the new Envy Of None material, more than anything else. I'm comfortable with it and I know what to expect. The Envy Of None stuff is some of my favourite guitar playing. Maybe it's because it's so current. Maybe it's because it's so freeing. For me, it's liberating. Because I mean, very few solos. I don't know if there are any solos to speak of, so it's a whole different approach. It's not Rush and I love it.

"Because of that fact, I got to explore other things. I learned how to make my guitar sound so *unlike* a guitar. That was a really cool challenge and such a creative endeavour for me. This material for the second album is definitely Envy Of None and you can't miss it because of Maiah [Wynne's, vocalist] voice, but the material is awesome. It sounds so good. It's really going to be great.

> "The Envy Of None stuff is some of my favourite playing. For me, it's liberating, very few solos"
>
> ***Alex Lifeson***

"So yeah, I have my go-to gear in the studio and I like to work fast. I can't sit still and I'm always on the move. I'm very impulsive and everything happens really quick in the studio. I think I get bored. Geddy is the complete opposite. He's very methodical. He has to try everything before he knows what doesn't work. Whereas when I'm working on my solos, after those first five or six takes, I lose interest. It drives me crazy, but at the same time, that's the best that's gonna come out of me. That's been my observation of my playing and the way I work, whether I like it or not."

When you get to that point, do you just tell Geddy or your producer that you're done?

Alex: "It's interesting because to give you an example, with *Moving Pictures*, typically I would go in and do five or six takes of the solo and then I feel like I'm getting a little stale and Geddy would say, 'That's fine, leave it with us,' so he and Terry Brown [producer] would comp solos. I had to leave and was not allowed to stay in the room, which was fine. It takes a lot of energy out of you, when you're that intensely focused on playing. So I would come back and if it sounded great and not too ridiculous, I would approve it and we would move on. If not, then we just attack it again.

"What I liked about that was that it involved everybody in the band. Everyone has a stake in it and you're not just focused on your own individual, selfish space. You're working together in the service of the song and to make it the best it can be. You can impart all your different influences and thoughts. It was a great working environment, despite us all being quite different as songwriters." G

https://lerxstamps.com

BOUGHT & SOLD

ACE FREHLEY

The former-KISS guitarist on the ultimate combo of Gibson and Marshall, and the price-boosting power of his personal signature

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"My dad got me a piece of crap, and then I got a Hagstrom, which had much better action, but I didn't like the pickup; it didn't have the power of a humbucker because it had single-coil pickups. After that, I got a Telecaster, but that didn't last too long. Then I got a Mustang that I modified and put a humbucker in. I got a Marshall, and that was the sound I'd been looking for. Once we [KISS] signed our record deal with Casablanca Records, I got a Honeyburst Les Paul and a Marshall stack – and we were off to the races."

What was the last guitar you bought, and why?

"It was a Gibson Les Paul. It's a very slight blue metallic, almost like my nail polish [laughs]. I picked up that guitar on Reverb and it sounds fabulous. I recorded with that on my new record, [*10,000 Volts*]. When you get something good – I mean, like a good Les Paul – all set up correctly, and into a Marshall amp, it's a no-brainer. You don't have to use any special effects if you have the technique, so I rarely use special effects."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've had when buying a guitar?

"I bought a 1952 Telecaster in the original case, which was like cardboard with the tags. It was in completely mint condition. I remember talking to the guy I got it from, and he said he got it from a woman whose son went off to war. Unfortunately, he never came back, so she had it under his bed and didn't know what it was worth. Today, that guitar… Well, I sold it for a lot of money, but it today would probably be worth anywhere from $350,000 or more."

PHOTO BY GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

A not-so-modest sum: "When I sign any guitar I buy, it doubles or triples in price," says Frehley

Have you ever sold a guitar that you intensely regret letting go?

"Supposedly, the '59 Les Paul I bought before recording my [1978] solo album is now up to $350,000 or more. That was the biggest regret. It was after I quit KISS; I was still getting fucked up and I wanted to go to Atlantic City because I love to gamble. So I booked the helicopter on the West Side [of New York City], where they have those helipads, and I stopped at Richie Friedman's We Buy [Guitars] and sold it. But I had got it from his brother across the street, who had a small store and had it in the window. A lot of the varnish had faded; I played it and instantly fell in love with it. He charged me four grand for it. It's amazing how guitars appreciate.

> "You can always make a shitty amp sound decent. But you gotta have the guitar; that's the nucleus"

"You know, when I sign any guitar I buy, it doubles or triples in price. So I can always make money on any guitar I've bought that I want to sell. Just because I got too many, I have more than 120 guitars here and I just want to get rid of some of them. When I was on the Alice Cooper tour [in 2022], I was going crazy hitting pawn shops; I must have bought 35 guitars!"

To that end, what's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had when buying a guitar?

"Right now, all my guitar cases are in my attic. I have an 8,000sqft house with a huge attic, and all my cases are up there. I keep the boxes for the important outboard gear,

ACE'S GO-TO RIG

"You know, my rig hasn't changed much since the 70s with KISS. I don't really use pedals; I never really did, save for a few times here and there. But really, you know, my sound has always been, and kinda really still is, my Les Paul plugged into a cranked Marshall. I have a Fender Tweed and guitars all over my studio, and I'll use different guitars on my records for layering, but live, I'm all about my Les Paul. I plug that into my Marshall with no effects; I'd trip over them if I had them on stage [laughs]."

Sealed with a KISS: Frehley's established live setup is a Les Paul, a cranked Marshall and a whole lotta attitude

PHOTO BY GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

speakers and stuff that I have in my recording studio. I've got my guitars all over the house: in my office, down in my studio, up in my bedroom, hanging on the walls. I don't regret any of them and can always make money on them if I sign one."

When was the last time you stopped to look in a guitar shop or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"I'm really not looking at buying anything. I probably have 20 acoustics, and eight of those 20 are 12-strings. I've got Les Pauls, Strats and Telecasters; they just decorate the walls of my studio. I walk into pawn shops and, depending on where you are, the best ones tend to be down south. A lot of people there don't know what they're worth.

"I bought a Keith Richards model, you know, with the humbucker, for like 300 bucks. It's probably worth at least a grand. And then, if I sign that, I could sell it for two thousand. But I really liked the guitar, so I'm probably going to keep that one. I also bought a Danelectro guitar inside the case with the amp, like the ones they had at Sears. I found one of those. It's always the coolest guitars you look out for when you're a collector."

Would you rather have a great guitar and a cheap amp or a great amp and a cheap guitar?

"The guitar is what makes the sound, so you can take a shitty amp, use overdrive and make it sound decent. You can also use a fuzz box or a sustaining pedal, so you can always make a shitty amp sound halfway decent. But you gotta have the guitar; that's the nucleus."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would you choose and why?

"Humbuckers give you more output. If you put them on a voltmeter, they definitely put out more voltage, which, when amplified, will give you a louder, more powerful, more distorted sound. In conjunction with the preamp on a Marshall or any other amp that has a preamp, that will also give you distortion and sustain. It's just about getting the right amp. And if you tweak it properly, it can get you where you want to go.

"My sound isn't very complicated. But I do like single coils. I've learned over the years that if you record a rhythm track with a Les Paul, you can make it nice and thick, then double it with a Fender Strat or a Telecaster. You end up with an even thicker track because the harmonic range of a single coil is a lot different than a humbucker." **[AD]**

Ace Frehley's new album, *10,000 Volts*, is out now on MNRK Music Group

www.acefrehley.com

The MOD SQUAD

SLIDE RULES

The dark art of bottleneck or slide guitar is on the increase, reckons Dave Burrluck. Time to consider how your setup can be maximised

Judging by the number of emails we've received recently, there's definitely more interest in slide guitar at the moment than I can remember for some time. But what's the best way to set up a guitar for slide? Good question – and it's been a while since we've shone any light on this topic (as far back as issue 430, to be precise). So, c'mon, let's slide on down.

I'm going to focus on electric slide guitar in this month's Mod Squad and start by saying that while there are no set rules for slide guitar setups, there are quite a few things to consider. Most obviously, there are plenty of ways to approach playing slide and to a certain extent that'll affect how you could set up your guitar to achieve those clean slide sounds.

A lap steel, for example [pics 1 & 2], the first electric guitar, is designed to just play slide on. You don't fret it – it doesn't have frets! – and raising both the nut and saddle on a regular guitar achieves the same thing. Conversely, many players with a light touch and good technique can use a pretty standard string height at both the nut and saddle, with or without a heavier string gauge. Most, however, probably sit between those two extremes.

Plenty of us play slide in standard tuning, too, perhaps just putting on a bottleneck for a solo, then return to standard playing. Others might use an open tuning but still want to fret conventionally as well as playing some slide licks and solos.

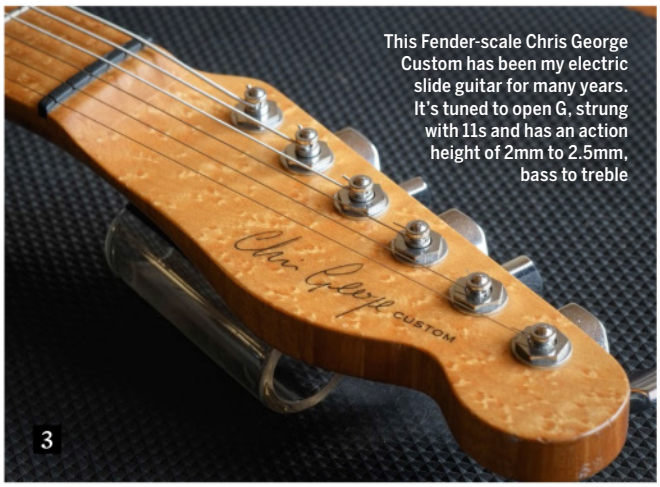
It's worth thinking about whether you're raising or lowering the strings in terms of pitch compared with standard tuning. For example, open E, as favoured by many, Derek Trucks included, is a *raised* tuning (low to high: E B E G# B E) that will subtly put more tension on the neck and possibly increase its relief. Elsewhere, open D (low to high: D A D F# A D) and open G (low to high: DGDGBD) are *lowered* tunings; they slightly lower string tension when compared with standard tuning and put less stress on the neck [pics 3 & 4].

Scale length is something else to consider, certainly in terms of string tension. In the same way many of us might use 0.009-gauge strings on a longer Fender-scale and 10s on a shorter Gibson scale, for that clean slide aim (with the same string height) you might want to consider 10s on the Fender and 11s on the Gibson.

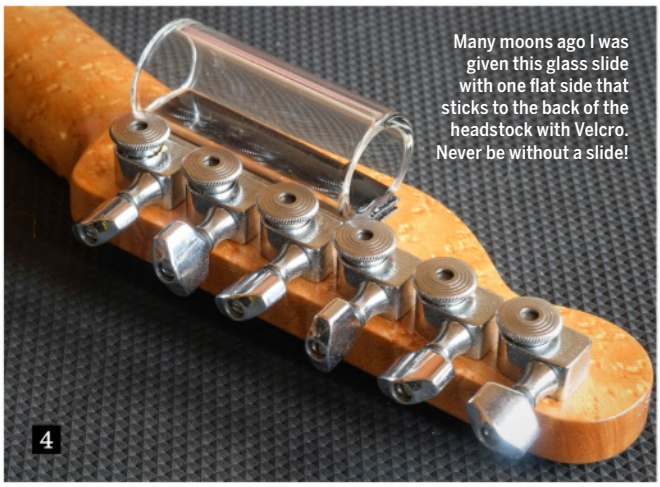
> "There are plenty of ways to approach playing slide, which affects how you set up your guitar"

1 You don't need to worry about setup with a lap steel – the strings sit way off the printed fingerboard

2 Typically, a lap steel's bridge is uncambered and, like the nut, raises the strings far above the position guide



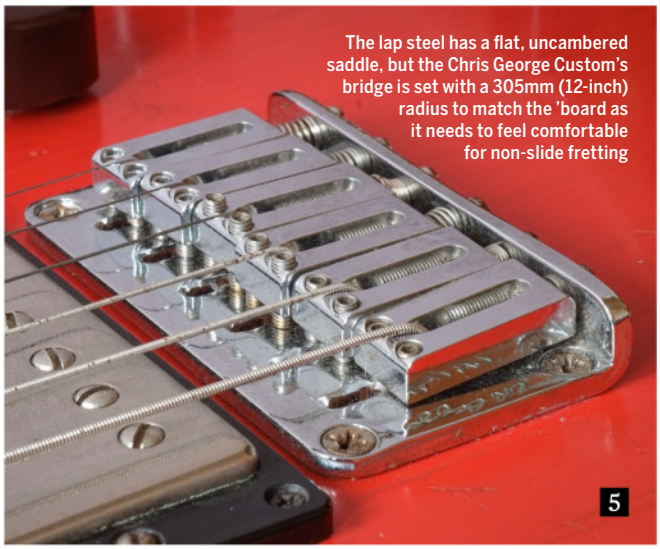
3 This Fender-scale Chris George Custom has been my electric slide guitar for many years. It's tuned to open G, strung with 11s and has an action height of 2mm to 2.5mm, bass to treble



4 Many moons ago I was given this glass slide with one flat side that sticks to the back of the headstock with Velcro. Never be without a slide!

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Originally conceived as a Variax slide guitar but reworked to the standard setup here, this model has a bird's eye maple neck from Warmoth and the solid alder body's outline is borrowed from Tom Anderson – it was always designed to be a one-off



The lap steel has a flat, uncambered saddle, but the Chris George Custom's bridge is set with a 305mm (12-inch) radius to match the 'board as it needs to feel comfortable for non-slide fretting

5

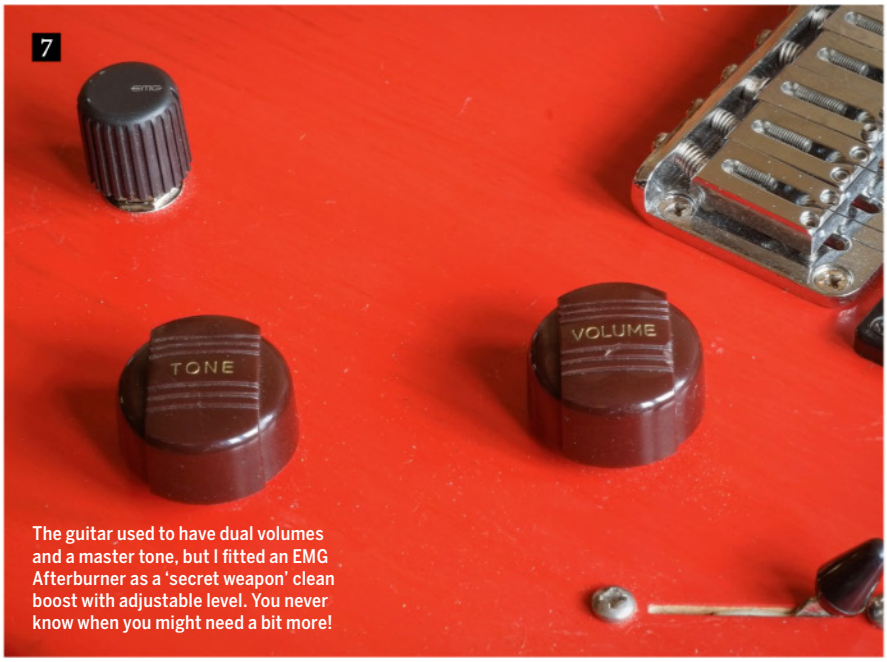
Chris George had this set of Lollar El Rayo pickups going spare: single-coil-sounding humbuckers that get huge with a little gain boost

6

Tension Matters

Why is tension so important? The key is to get a clean voice where the slide doesn't push the strings onto the frets. So with a standard or raised open tuning on a Fender scale you might well find that using 10s and a pretty standard string height will give you enough tension for those clean slide licks. However, with the same tuning, string height and string gauge on a shorter scale, it might be harder to achieve that clean slide goal [pic 5].

Within these parameters, there are plenty of other things to consider, but these really are very player dependent. A good place to start is simply in standard tuning. Let's take a T-style guitar with a Fender scale length, 0.010-gauge strings and a pretty standard string height of 1.6mm on the treble, a little higher on the bass side. Can you execute your licks cleanly? It does require a light, quite precise touch, but I find that doable, not least around the slide-friendly D, G and B strings; the top E is a little harder to control. So, without totally ruining your non-slide playing, your options would be to slightly raise the treble-side string height and/or go up a gauge just on your B and E strings.



7

The guitar used to have dual volumes and a master tone, but I fitted an EMG Afterburner as a 'secret weapon' clean boost with adjustable level. You never know when you might need a bit more!

> "If you're new to slide playing, try a higher string action until you get used to using a slide"

With the same guitar moving to a lowered open G, I'd definitely be tempted to go up a string gauge, which might well be enough to feel more comfortable for slide and not too uncomfortable for your Keef moments [pic 6 & 7].

Now try the same experiments with a shorter Gibson-scale instrument. Personally, in standard tuning, I can just about get away with it, but with the high E dropped to D I'm struggling. Also, experience tells me that once the adrenaline of a performance kicks in, I'd be in trouble unless I'd taken remedial action: again, raising the string gauge and/or the string height. Back in issue 430's column I used Derek Trucks as an example, reporting that he apparently favours the following string gauges: (high to low) 0.011, 0.014, 0.017, 0.026, 0.036 and 0.046, like a regular 0.010 to 0.046 set but with the top two strings from a set of 11s.

If you're new to slide playing, you may well be better off with a higher string action until you get used to the initially quite alien concept of sticking one of your fingers inside a glass or metal tube – and that slide, of course, can impact on the way you string and set up your guitar.

You might need to raise your string height at the bridge to encourage clean slide, but what about the nut? [pic 8] Going back to that lap steel, the strings at the nut are way above the fingerboard and plenty of players will raise the nut on a conventional guitar that's set for slide. Now, if you have a dedicated slide guitar then you can easily do that either with a nut riser (as many acoustic slide players prefer) or, with less extreme results, either make a new nut or simply put a hard-plastic shim under your existing nut. Personally, I find a compromise for electric slide. A slightly higher nut is good, but if it's too high then it simply makes life a bit of an uphill struggle for regular fretted playing on the same guitar, especially with a heavier string gauge.

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

8

The Chris George Custom's nut height is only slightly higher than a non-slide guitar

Slides come in many different styles: here is a selection of glass models

9

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

Weight, size, internal diameter and wall thickness will all affect the feel and sound of your slide experience. Here are some examples

BRAND/TYPE	WEIGHT (g)	LENGTH (mm)	INTERNAL WALL DIAMETER (mm)	WALL THICKNESS (mm)
Unknown/anodised aluminium	38	62	19.2	3.4
Unknown/chromed steel	43	59	19.2	1.5
Dunlop/glass	45	69.3	20	4
Diamond Bottlenecks/'Pill Bottle' glass	45	72	17.6	3 (approx.)
Unknown/glass	55	68	18.5 to 21.5	4.5
Diamond Bottlenecks/Ultimate glass	86	60.5	19	5.85
Diamond Bottlenecks/Domed-Top glass	96	72	18.3	6.2
Dunlop/Moonshine Ceramic	70	71.3	22	5.52
Wolfram/Martin Simpson Artist Series Signature Slide stainless steel	106	63.5	17 to 21	2 to 4.2
Unknown/brass	116	60	18.5	3.3

You may prefer metal, of course!

10

Slide Selection

Just like tweaking your setup, finding the best bottleneck or slide for you [pics 9 and 10] is key to maximising your sound and comfort. This might be The Mod Squad, but I won't be explaining how to make a true bottleneck from a wine bottle as many players had to do back in the day. Instead, there are plenty on the market to choose from that come in all shapes and sizes, not to mention materials and prices. I'm not sure I can lay claim to having tried out every type of slide out there, but I've certainly had a good number stuck on the fingers of my left hand over the years.

Let's start with size and that, of course, is directly related to which finger you're going to use and your playing position, particularly if you're standing with your guitar strapped on. For example, I use two fingers (not at the same time!). For standard

While our various slides are of a similar size, there's quite a difference in weights

tuning with the guitar in a normal standing strapped on position – not too high, not too low – I use my second finger with the slide stopping at my lower knuckle so that the finger and slide can lay over the strings in pretty much normal playing position.

When I'm playing my main open-tuned slide guitar, I strap it much higher. That way I can use the same slide but over the full length of my little finger, meaning my hand can round further over the strings. It allows for plenty of damping behind the slide, not to mention voicing different notes and partial chords behind the slide, too. Playing seated, I'll always use my little finger. Plenty of players use their third finger; I've even seen the occasional player using their first finger! I'm happy with pretty regular-sized slides of approximately 62mm long and with an internal diameter of 18mm to 20mm.

> "Finding the best bottleneck or slide for you is key to maximising your sound and comfort"

It makes sense that the bigger walled, heavier slide would be the 'best', but that's not backed up by everyone's choice. A lighter slide is easier to control – pretty important – not least if you have some fast licks to play with a bit more of a gained sound. If you're a slide buff you've probably got a few different slides and bottlenecks. For me, size and weight are most important, less so the different materials, which are typically glass or Pyrex, ceramic, brass, chromed steel and stainless steel. Plenty of players have used anything to hand – socket wrenches, copper pipe, beer bottles or shot glasses.

But what's the best material? And do the different materials impart different sounds? Well, very good luck with that! Manufacturers of slides will often get quite flowery with their tone descriptions, but whatever the material is, it's dampened by the digit you stick inside it. Speaking of which, remember that your fingers can get pretty sweaty, certainly when you're playing live, which can affect your control of the slide. And in worst cases cause it to completely slip off – which is a tad embarrassing mid-solo! Ceramic slides are porous as the internal surfaces aren't usually glazed, which can help with sweaty digit syndrome.

A glass, Pyrex or ceramic slide can easily get dropped and shatter on a hard surface, while brass is quite soft and can get pitted and become scratchy sounding. Products such as Wolfram's UK-made slides use aviation-grade materials that are polished super smooth and stay that way. Thicker walled, heavier slides, to my ears, do give a 'bigger' sound, while thinner-walled slides offer a more delicate tone, but the lighter weight can work with more standard string heights. Either way, what is important is matching the slide to your setup, style and sounds you aim to produce. G

SLIDE TIME

Check out these trusted suppliers as a starting point for your slide adventures

Jim Dunlop

Probably the best resource for slides in a dizzying array of materials and sizes, plus there are plenty of signature options to explore. They're readily available in-store and online.
www.jimdunlop.com

Diamond Bottlenecks

These UK-made glass slides and tonebars for lap steels have been this writer's personal choice for many years. Wide range of styles, glass colours and blends. Not only are its slides beautifully crafted, Diamond Bottlenecks' service is second to none.
www.diamondbottlenecks.com

Wolfram

The world's finest metal slides? Well, Martin Simpson and Michael Messer think so of these UK-made luxury pieces. While you'll find the serious craft of the tungsten carbide slides come at a price, the start-up Martin Simpson Artist Series stainless steel slide is very affordable and a superb choice.
https://wolframslides.com

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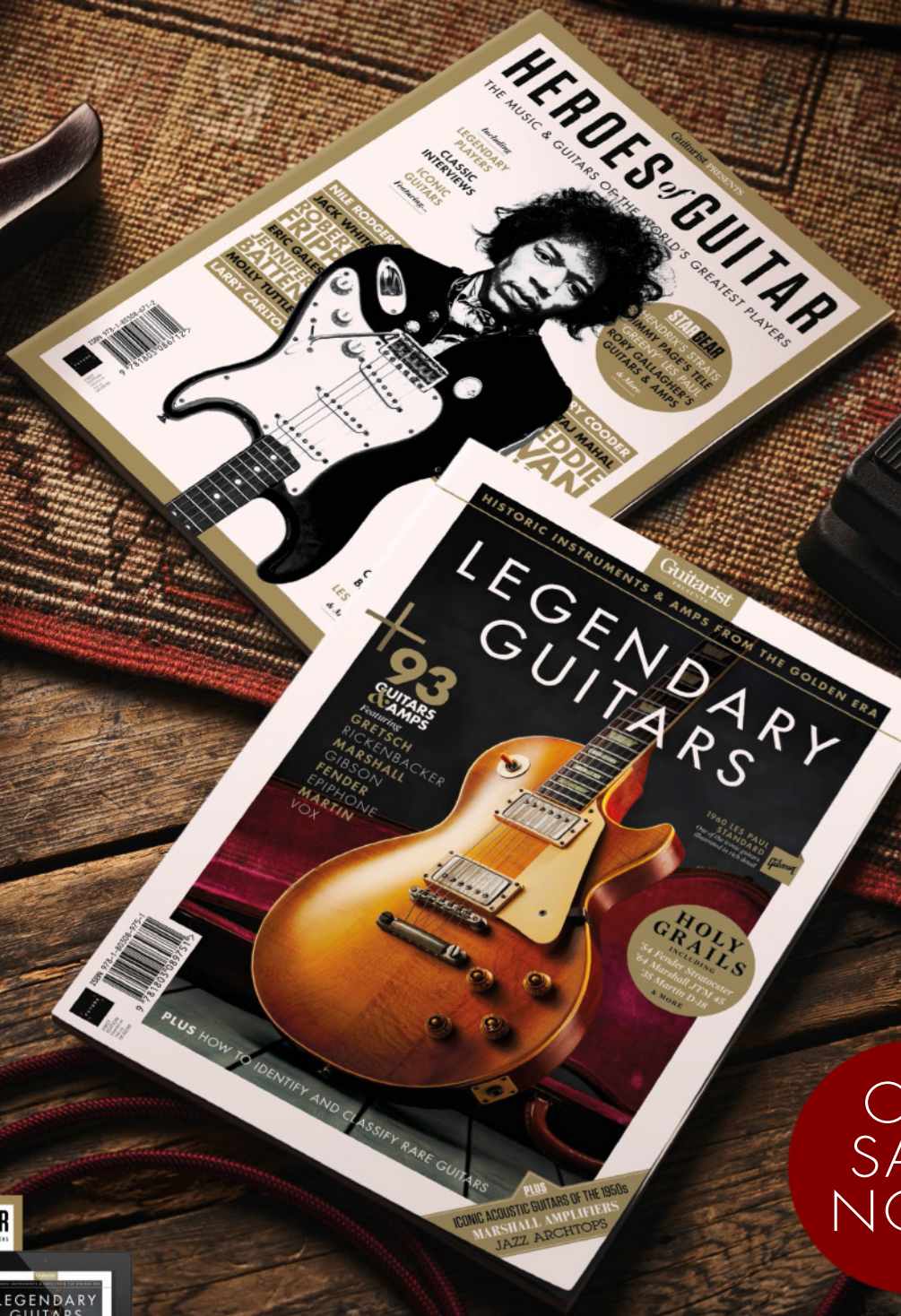

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Huw Price's Nitty Gritty

The terms 'echo' and 'delay' evoke different ideas according to their devices

Delay

When we talk about echo, it might make you think of vintage effects, which may be dirty, distorted and lo-fi in character. In contrast, 'delay' started becoming the standard term when digital technology made it possible to manufacture cleaner and quieter-sounding effects with a full frequency range and longer delay times. Whatever the nature of the effect, delay mimics something you might experience in a large empty building or a canyon. The time interval between a sound being generated and the sound that bounces back is long enough for the 'echo' to be heard as clear and distinct repeats.

Reverb is related, but these multiple repeats occur so quickly that the reflected sound is perceived as continuous, rather than something separate. Studio designers could build dedicated reverb chambers because the space required isn't actually that great. But tacking an echo canyon onto the back of a live room has never been a viable proposition... Consequently, echo effects didn't become commonplace until technological solutions presented themselves.

Reel Time

Looking back to the mid-1940s, the Allies returned from World War II having discovered Germany's secret method for biasing analogue tape. Applying a high-frequency signal greatly expands tape's upper frequency range, and it soon replaced acetate discs as the studio recording medium of choice. Now, while Les Paul may not have been the first to use tape for echo effects, he was certainly at the forefront. He probably began experimenting during the 1940s, and his 1951 track *The Whispering* demonstrates how he was pushing the creative use of echo further than anybody.

It's fairly simple to achieve tape echo. Most reel-to-reel machines have two or three heads, with one used to 'print' signal to tape, a second providing playback and a third offering higher quality playback for mixing purposes. When recording, the input signal is monitored, rather than the recorded signal. Since the tape heads are physically separate, there will be a slight delay or 'latency' if the playback is monitored instead of the input. This delay time is determined by distance between the record and playback heads, and the speed at which the tape is running.

Let's say the gap between the heads measures one inch and the machine is running at 15ips (inches per second). The delay here will be 1/15th second, which is 66 milliseconds. Double the tape speed and the delay halves, which is about right for automatic double tracking (ADT). If tape speed is halved, the delay time doubles to 133 milliseconds, which provides the slapback delay that echoed all across the country, rockabilly and rock 'n' roll records of the 50s. With varispeed fitted to a tape machine, the delay time could be adjusted to match tempo, but it's not critical with slapback echo.

Delay times with a single machine will always be fairly short, so for longer delays two machines had to be used and a long 'echo shelf' was once a common sight in control rooms. With an extended tape loop or a reel of tape running between two tape machines, the first would 'print' the signal to tape and the second would play it back. Remarkably long delay times could be dialled in. An engineer could use a stopwatch to estimate the track's tempo and crunch the numbers to determine the spacing between the two machines needed for a quarter, half or full bar delay.

> For longer delays, two machines had to be used and a long 'echo shelf' was a common sight in control rooms

For fine-tuning, a kick or snare drum was sent to the tape loop and varispeed could be used to optimise the feel of the delay in the track. It was also possible to send some of the echo return back to the tape machines to achieve multiple repeats. When pushed hard, this induced feedback loops that span off into dub and psychedelia.

The somewhat temperamental Binson Echorec used a rotating magnetic drum, rather than tape

Tapes & Drums

When tape echo became ubiquitous, top guitar players, such as Chet Atkins and Scotty Moore, realised they needed a way to reproduce their studio sound in a live context. Electronics whizz Ray Butts, who later designed the Filter'Tron humbucker, provided the solution when he designed a guitar amp with an integrated tape echo that he called the EchoSonic.

Before long, standalone tape echo units became popular. The Maestro Echoplex owed a considerable debt to Ray and achieved classic status thanks to players like Neil Young, Jimmy Page and Eddie Van Halen. Rather than vary the tape speed, delay time was adjusted by moving the playback head's position. Meanwhile in the UK, WEM Copicats reigned supreme. These units were especially popular among

Les Paul, pictured here in October 1941, started experimenting with echo effects during this decade

PHOTO BY CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Les Paul may not have been the first to use tape for echo effects, but he was certainly at the forefront

Boss's iconic DM-2 BBD analogue delay was released in 1981 as the compact pedal evolution of the larger-format DM-1 from 1978

fans of The Shadows, despite the fact that Hank Marvin used a Meizzi Vox Tape Echo.

Into the 70s, Roland introduced various Space Echo and Chorus Echo units that set new standards. Like some earlier designs, they had multiple playback heads that could be used individually or in combination for complex ambient effects. With varispeed and built-in spring reverb, these units boasted fans including Brian Setzer and Adrian Utley (who today favours the RE-202).

Like most gear from the pre-digital era, echo devices started out with valves, before moving over to discrete transistors and op-amp chips. Many players prefer the solid-state circuits and use tape echo devices to push their valve amps into overdrive. The Echoplex circuit is especially popular, and several modern stompbox boosts use the preamp design without the echo effect.

David Gilmour is one of the great exponents of delay and in his earlier years he favoured the Binson Echorec. Employing a rotating magnetic drum, rather than tape, they sound glorious, but Binsons are notoriously temperamental.

Wowed & Fluttered

Unlike studio-quality reel-to-reel tape recorders, most standalone tape echo units are loved for their flaws as much as their virtues. There are exceptions, but most have a limited frequency range and all distort to some extent. Depending on the design, irregular maintenance or wear and tear, some tape echoes struggle to run at a consistent speed. This induces an irregular pitch fluctuation called wow and flutter, and provides a distinctive vibrato that many players enjoy.

Less popular is the thump of the tape splice as the loop passes the head. This is one reason that Echoplex and Roland devices employed very long tape loops housed in an enclosure. Roland loops can last several years before they need replacing, and Echoplexes operate with plug-in tape cartridges that are easy to replace.

Bucket Brigade

Vintage tape echoes are not without their drawbacks. There's the inconvenience of lugging around extra gear, continual head cleaning and demagnetising, and inevitable servicing expenses. No wonder guitarists were looking for easier options by the 70s. Help arrived in the form of the bucket brigade device (BBD), which is an integrated circuit comprising numerous capacitor cells. Packets of charge can be transferred from one capacitor to another, and the time lag for every transfer creates the delay. The process is often likened to a row of firefighters moving water by transferring it from one bucket to another. Hence the term 'bucket brigade'.

In order to minimise distortion and maintain a good signal-to-noise ratio, the input signal must be compressed and troublesome high frequencies filtered out. A clock governs the transfer speed, and after

Following its release in 1974, the Roland RE-201 Space Echo became an industry standard for studio delays

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON/FUTURE MUSIC

Line 6's DL4 was released in 1999 – you'll hear it all over records from the Noughties and beyond

PHOTO BY SIMON LEES/TOTAL GUITAR

the delay processing, clock noises are filtered out before the delayed signal passes through an expander to be mixed into the dry signal.

BBD delays are hardly hi-fi devices and create delay effects that resemble tape and drum echo, minus the pitch modulation. But they require no maintenance and are significantly smaller and lighter. Classic examples include the Boss DM series, Ibanez AD9 and lifelong favourite of U2's The Edge, the Electro-Harmonix Memory Man.

Rack 'n' Roll

In any digital recording system the first stage converts the analogue signal into data for storage. When it's needed, this information is retrieved and converted back to analogue with no discernible distortion or signal degradation. Since the data can be stored indefinitely, there's the potential for extraordinarily long delay times.

Most digital delays display the delay time, and with so much music being recorded to the grid, it's easy to dial in settings that perfectly match the track's tempo. Every professional engineer once carried a delay chart in their Filofax, but these days you can Google 'BPM to delay chart' instead.

With such clarity and precise control, multiple delays became commonplace in mixing because things didn't degenerate into sonic soup. Instead, lush atmospheric textures could be created and producer Daniel Lanois is a recognised master of the art. Classics of the era included the Bel BD 80, TC Electronic 2290 and the AMS DMX1580S.

Rack-mounted delays became commonplace in 80s guitar rigs and were generally connected via effects loops. Precision delays allowed guitarists to generate complex rhythmic patterns from the simplest of ideas that could ping-pong between loudspeakers. The Edge is perhaps the most well-known exponent of this playing style.

Bouncing Back

Far from being anachronistic, vintage-style echo has never been more popular. In large part, that's because digital modelling technology is so often directed towards recreating classic equipment. Most DAWs come with native tape echo plug-ins, and some of the Audio Unit studio delay and tape echo emulations combine accurate sounds with precise digital control of delay times, distortion and pitch modulation.

> Vintage-style echo has never been more popular with digital technology recreating classic equipment

Digital delays in stompbox form began appearing during the 1980s, but they were largely functional, rather than characterful. Things really got interesting when Line 6 introduced the DL4 Delay Modeler with its smorgasbord of classic delay models, ergonomic controls and tap tempo. That set the tone and these days you can buy a Space Echo, Echoplex, Binson or Eventide in stompbox form. Some are actually made by the original manufacturers, with tonal characteristics and looks that are in keeping with the originals. Or how about a digitally controlled tape or drum echo that will fit on a pedalboard? Whatever your preference, we're swamped with choice. G

www.huwpriceguitar.com

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

This custom-ordered oddball is an electric bass with six strings and two pickups

1965 Gibson EB-6D

A 1965 Gibson EB-BD with a "unique" sunburst

"Several features make this example unique. Firstly, there's the colour, because I've never seen a sunburst one before. It's like a two-tone tobacco sunburst; I've had a Les Paul SG that was the same colour. It had to be custom-ordered and that's why there's a 'custom' engraving on the truss rod cover. Then there's the ebony fingerboard with genuine mother-of-pearl block markers. Every other EB-6D I've seen had a rosewood fingerboard with 'mother of toilet seat' celluloid dot markers, but this is more like a Les Paul Custom board, minus the binding.

"There's a pearl plug where the jack socket would normally be. The original owner, who must have ordered this specially, requested that the jack socket be mounted on the control coverplate. They must have done this to prevent the wood from tearing out in the event of someone hitting or standing on the plug.

"Gibson intended players to use right-angled jack plugs with front-mounted sockets, but most didn't and damage in this area is fairly common. I assume the thinking was that the plug would simply pull out from the back if anything happened. And if the plastic plate got damaged, the owner could easily order a replacement. In order to accommodate the socket, Gibson had to customise the control cavity rout, but there are no other structural differences.

"Both pickups are 'Patent Number' humbuckers identical to the ones Gibson was fitting to regular six-string guitars. Being a 1965 model, the hardware is a bit of a mixture, with nickel-plated pickup covers and a chrome-plated coverplate. The bridge is the same as the one Gibson used for the four-string basses, but they cut six rather than four slots and made six little string-grooves on the saddle.

"EB-6s sell quickly and are usually gone straight after I put them on the website. I'm surprised at the number of people who want them because I don't think they sound as good as a Fender VI and they're not as versatile. I think the EB-6 can sound a little mushy with the humbuckers, although these pickups have a lot more clarity and tonal range than the earlier 'mudbucker' pickups that Gibson fitted to the EB-0.

> "The six-string bass was a phase that all the manufacturers went through. It was never a big seller"

"This one comes with its original hardshell black Tolex case. EB-6D cases had to be longer because the headstock is enormous; it's almost like Gibson's 12-string headstock but a little wider. The neck is full, but it's not a giant like the late-50s ones or thin like an early 60s neck. It most closely resembles the type of neck you'd find on a '63 or '64 ES-335. It's a little bit wider at the nut and it gets deeper as you move towards the body, but the shoulders and general feel are pretty similar. I'd describe it as a very robust 'C' neck. The frets are pretty big and wide, but they're not gigantic by any means, and you can play chords and bend notes quite easily.

"In 1959, Gibson made the first EB-6 and it was like the ES-335 with a semi-hollow double-cutaway body and a centre block. It had one big humbucker pickup with a black plastic cover that was eventually changed to a nickel cover. The transition to the solid body version happened around the same time the doublenecks acquired solid bodies in 1961 .

"They actually made some of those with a regular guitar neck and an EB-6 neck. There are several photos showing Elvis playing his and it's currently on display at Gracelands. The EBSF-1250 had a built-in fuzz tone circuit, but that was removed around 1965 and the model name was simplified to EBS-1250. Around 30 were made before it was discontinued in 1970. They do come up for sale every once in a while, and I always attempt to buy every one I can get.

"The EB-6D only lasted until 1966 and the six-string bass was a phase that all the manufacturers went through. It was never a big seller. This one is near mint and if 10 is the best, I'd rate it as a solid 9.75. It doesn't look as if it was ever used much, but it plays very well and the flat-wound stings look so old they may even be the original factory set. Round-wound strings would add brightness, but I think this is the perfect instrument for flats and I'm leaving them on for the next owner to decide." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

This model features a slightly wider and "very robust" C neck

PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELLSTRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

David Gilmour

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Fender Stratocaster (with EMG DG20 pickup set), Keeley Boss SD-1 & Fender Blues Deluxe Reissue | **Difficulty** ★★★☆☆ | 15 mins per example

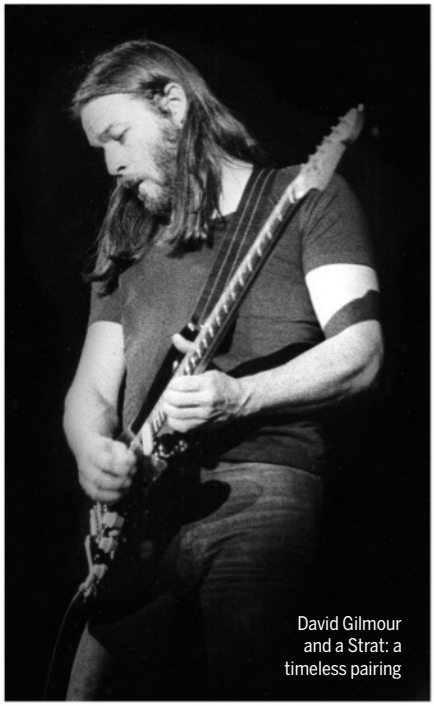
FEW PLAYERS have taken the blues vocabulary and incorporated it into progressive/psychedelic rock with such eloquence. David Gilmour's tone, note choice and sense of rhythm elevated Pink Floyd to a different level when he joined the band in 1967. As the era of the epic guitar solo dawned, David established himself as a soloist few could match, with a strong sense of melody and a knack for creating memorable parts – even in some of the more 'out there' free-form jams that were so characteristic of the early Floyd.

From this time up to and including *The Dark Side Of The Moon* in 1973, there were strong echoes (pun intended) of Jimi Hendrix in David's Fuzz Face'd ambient solos. From *Wish You Were Here* onwards, he refined his tones a little more. There was still lots of edge when required, but he developed a more controlled sound, often featuring the latest gadgets as they became available: for example, the MXR Phase 90 features on *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* and *Have A Cigar*.

Though David is famous for his complicated multi-amp rigs and effects racks, he maintains that it's possible to get the essence of his sound with relatively simple and easily available gear. This may seem hard to believe, but it is certainly true to say that David's playing would be recognisable whatever he plugged into.

The example solo/licks here are inspired by his solos on tracks such as *Comfortably Numb*, *On An Island* and *What Do You Want From Me*. I'm using the bridge pickup with medium/high gain (not too much, though). David is known for playing at high stage/studio volumes and gets most of his sustain from this, so be prepared to tweak and maybe add a little compression before any drive. A digital echo/reverb gives a nice finishing touch. Hope you enjoy and see you next time. G

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

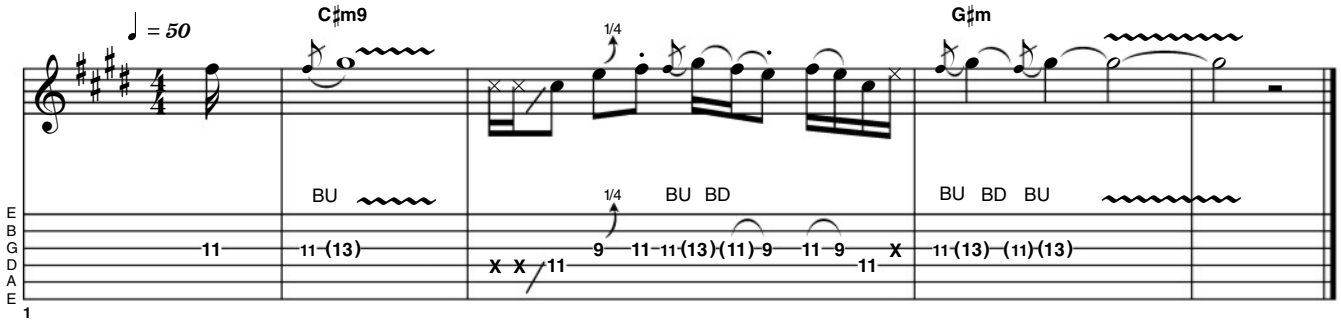


David Gilmour and a Strat: a timeless pairing

PHOTO BY GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Example 1

THE FIRST PHRASE establishes a strong beginning with the held bend, before playing around more rhythmically in this same area (shape 1 C# minor pentatonic) and reiterating the bend to finish. Be very mindful of details such as vibrato, short staccato hits and bluesy quarter-tone bends. These are marked in the transcription, but in an ideal scenario you'll eventually find yourself adding this sort of stuff in without thinking too consciously. That's when you'll know things are really coming together!



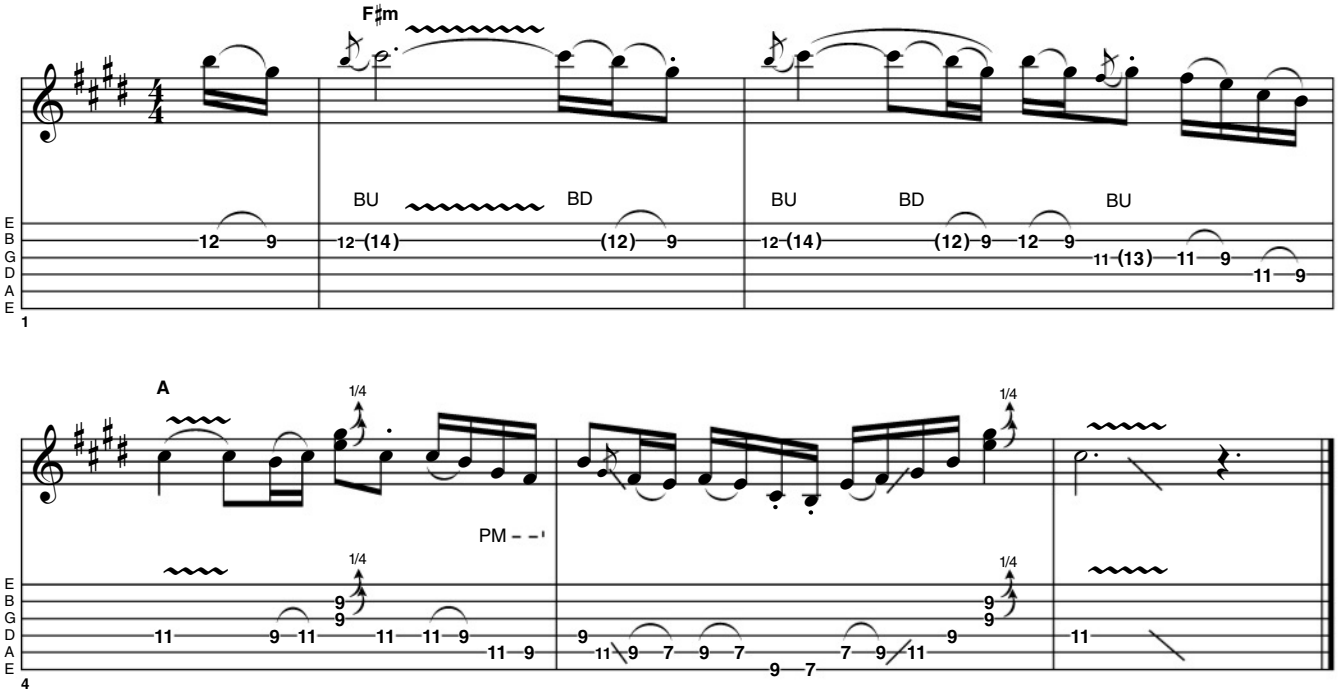
70 Years of the Strat

"David Gilmour is an outstanding Strat player. He always gets a variety of great tones, uses finger vib[rato] and the vibrato bar, has super feel, creates beautifully constructed bluesy solos and is not afraid to incorporate triads or let a phrase really speak by pausing before beginning the following line. Wonderful!"

Hank Marvin
Guest Editor

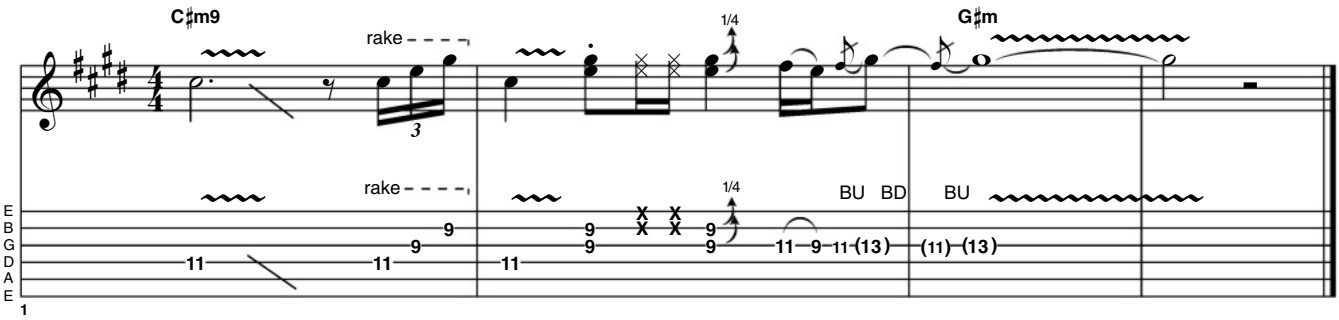
Example 2

BEGINNING IN A SIMILAR MANNER to Example 1 with a held repeated bend, we soon kick things up a gear, shifting between shapes 1 and 5 of the C# minor pentatonic. A particularly notable feature here is the repeated use of that doublestop at the 9th fret of the third and second strings. Pull this slightly sharp and you're using one of David's favourite devices, featured in many of his solos. Elsewhere, keep an eye out for little details like staccato notes and even a touch of palm muting.



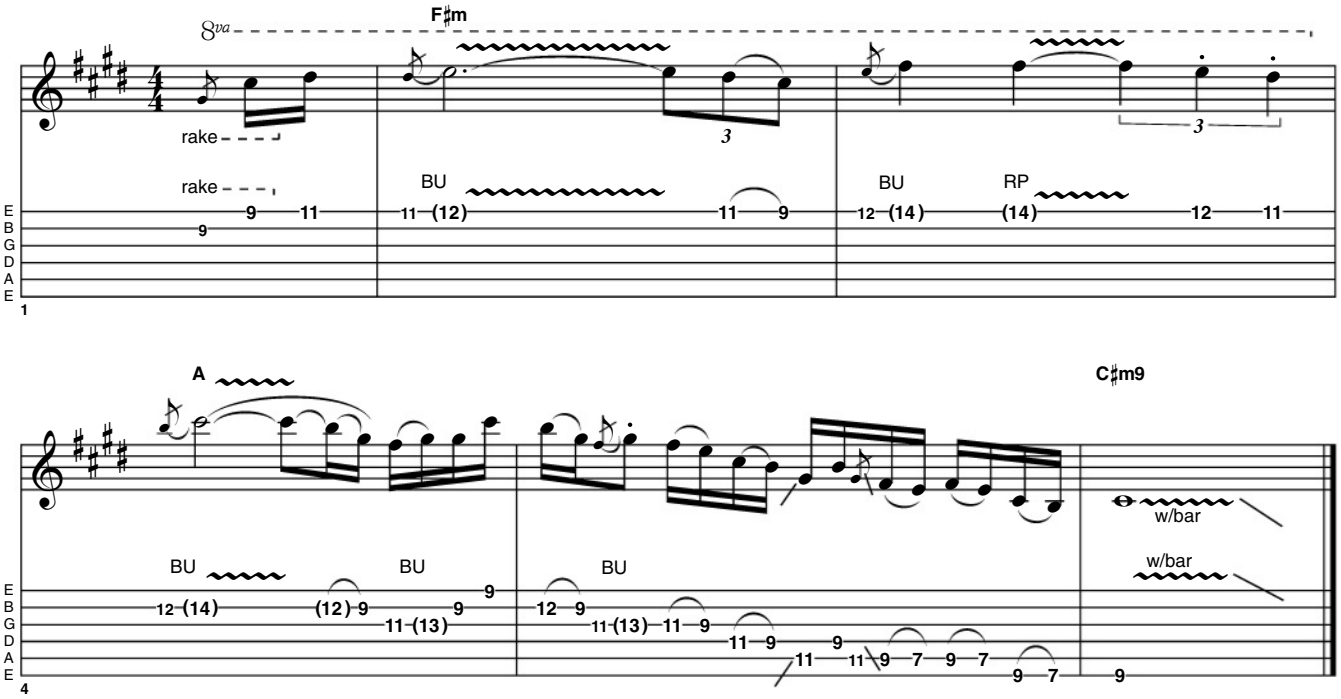
Example 3

REUSING THE LAST NOTE of Example 2, we then rake quickly across a C# minor triad. You'll recognise this as another favourite move of David's; it's a great way to add an exciting flourish without feeling the need to zoom around the fretboard. We follow up with some funky doublestops and muted rhythmic hits. Maybe try a few different ways to finish this phrase using different rhythms or string bends. This could be the way to incorporate some Gilmour into your own style.



Example 4

STARTING WITH A RAKE across the second and first strings, we then tackle a couple of held melodic bends. Be particularly careful when pitching these, as you'll need to hold them there. The same goes for the following bar just before the staccato triplets. We finish with the busiest passage of all, but it's all taken from shapes 1 and 5 of the C# minor pentatonic, so we're on familiar ground. Just take your time and don't feel you need to duplicate exactly what is being played here. The vibe is what matters most.



Hear It Here

PINK FLOYD
THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

Perhaps an obvious choice, but it would be difficult to justify not citing this one. Continuing somewhat from where 1971's *Meddle* left off, David is still using a very Hendrix-influenced fuzz sound, though he's already refining it with the liberal use of a Binson Echorec. Check out his searing solo on *Time*, contrasting approaches on Money and some funky rhythmic Uni-Vibe (set to its fastest setting) on *Any Colour You Like*.

PINK FLOYD
THE WALL

Though tensions were apparently developing in the band by this point, it contains some of David's finest recorded moments with a respectful nod to the *Wish You Were Here* album. Check out *In the Flesh?* just to hear the power of his Strat tone, then *The Thin Ice* for a great example of how refined his lead tone had become at this point. Inevitably, we must mention the great *Comfortably Numb*, but do also check out the break on *Young Lust*.

DAVID GILMOUR
ON AN ISLAND

This solo album is absolutely full of classic Gilmour solos. Particular highlights are the two contrasting solos on the title track, but be sure to listen to *The Blue* for some very wacky moments courtesy of the DigiTech Whammy pedal. *Take A Breath* features a satisfying amount of aggression, and honourable mention should go to the almost hi-fi clean soloing on the final track *Where We Start*. Having an orchestra to back you probably helps with the inspiration!

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JUNIOR MARVIN

The Wailers guitarist talks about his new album and how Hendrix and The Beatles shaped his career

EPIPHONE HISTORIC ACOUSTICS

A 1942 Banner J-45, 1957 SJ-200 and J-180 LS join the company's 'Inspired By Gibson' range

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Acoustic

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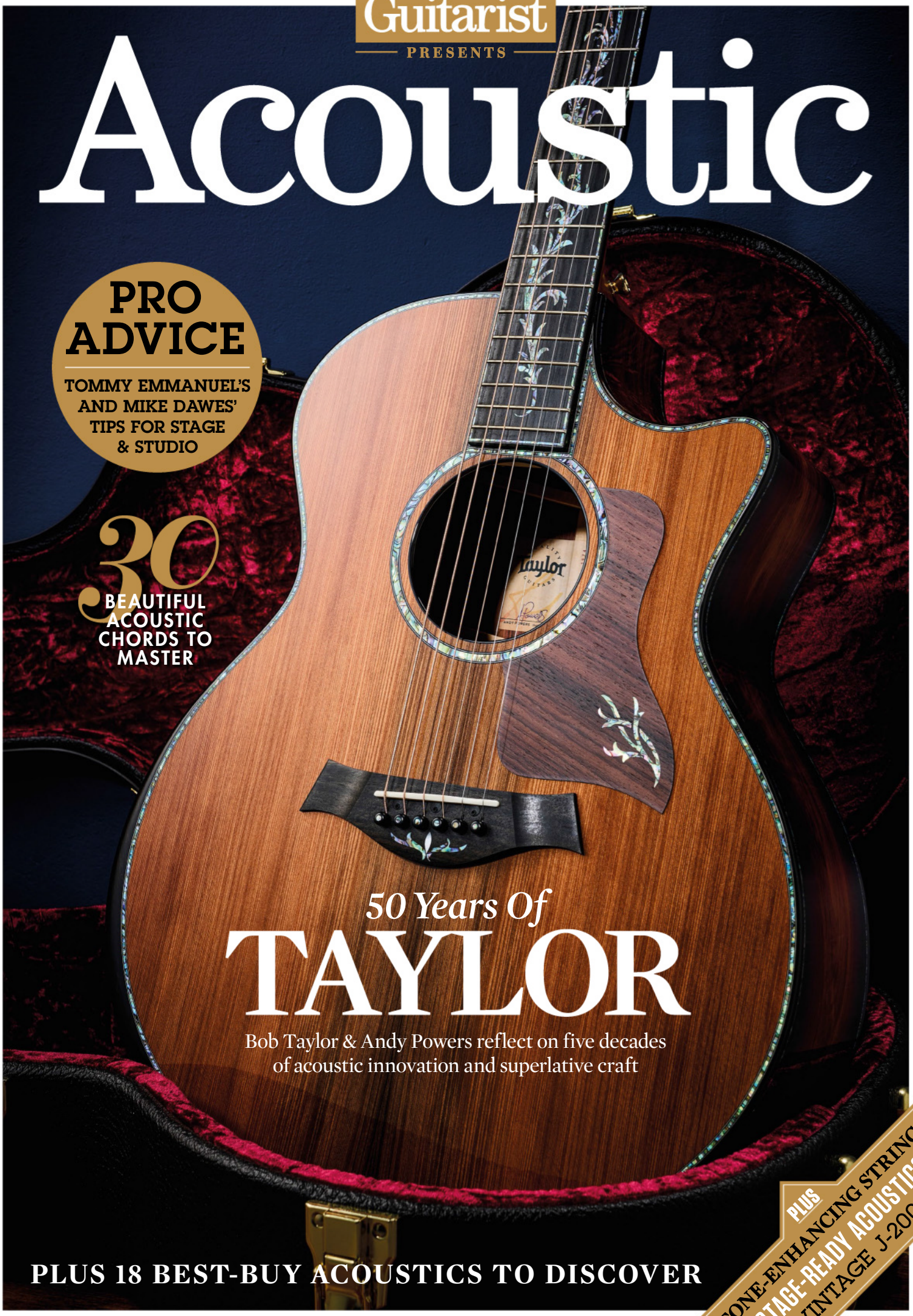
30 BEAUTIFUL ACOUSTIC CHORDS TO MASTER



50 Years Of TAYLOR

Bob Taylor & Andy Powers reflect on five decades of acoustic innovation and superlative craft

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Guitarist
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Acoustic

A celebration of the rich heritage and exquisite sound of the acoustic guitar

We all love an anniversary, and so it was a great pleasure to join in with Taylor Guitars' 50th celebrations by talking to co-founder Bob Taylor and master builder and CEO Andy Powers. Over the years we've seen how the company has introduced innovations that have streamlined modern building techniques, including the daring move away from traditional X-bracing in favour of its own V-Class system. So I'm sure you'll join us in sending hearty congratulations to everyone at Taylor on their half century – and wish them plenty more!

Elsewhere in our special Acoustic mini-mag, you'll find a look at a trio of J-200s and note that, by coincidence, Gibson is celebrating its 130th year as a guitar maker in 2024.

We also take into consideration the often-overlooked role that strings play in getting that optimal acoustic sound. There's so much choice available these days in terms of gauges, coated, uncoated, phosphor bronze, 80/20... But after checking out our chat with an expert from Rotosound on page 26, we hope making your choice in this direction will be that much easier.

Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy and see you next time...

David Mead **Deputy Editor**

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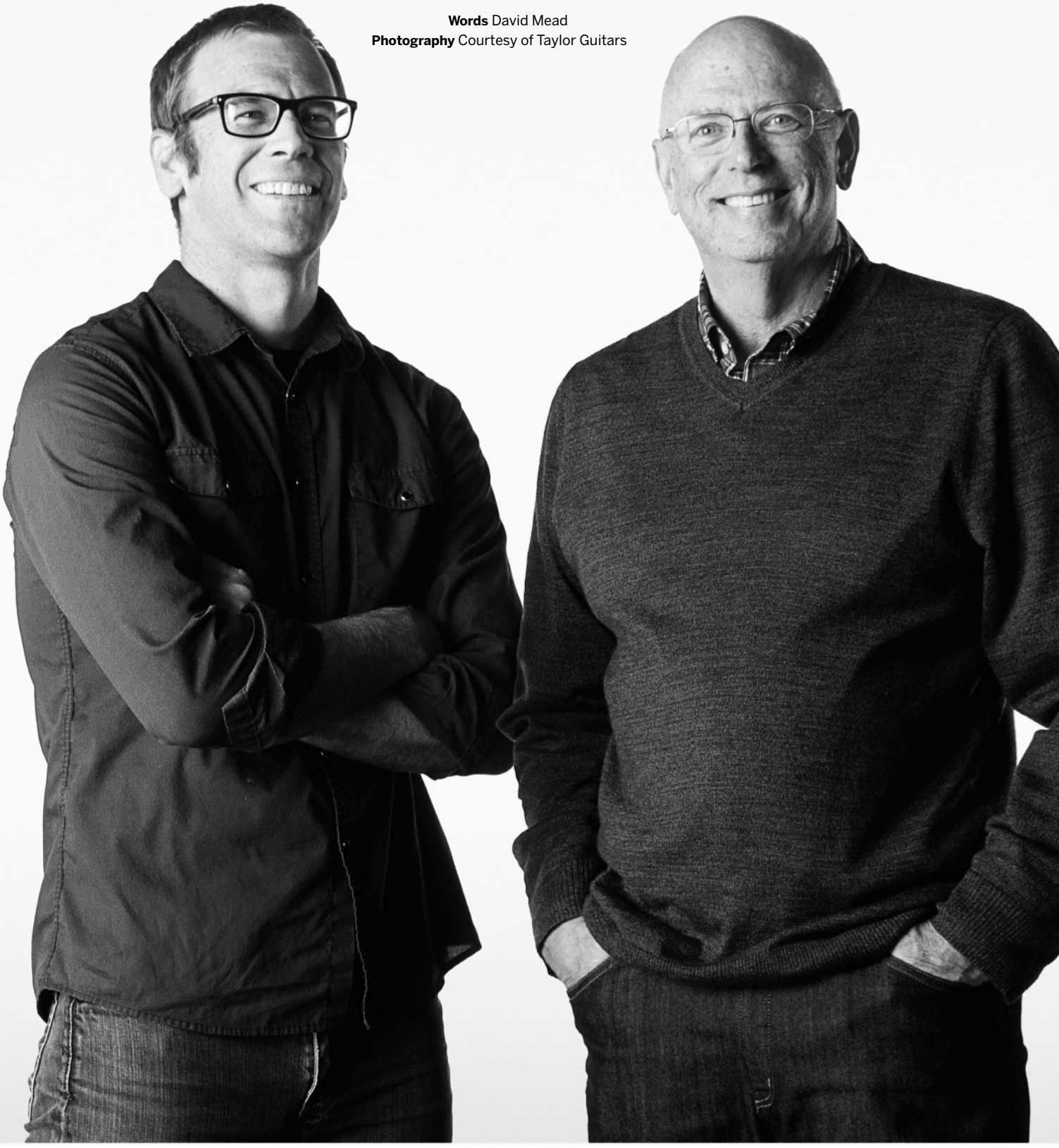
Cover Photography by Olly Curtis

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

TAYLOR MADE

As Taylor Guitars clocks up its 50th year in business we talk to current CEO and master builder Andy Powers and co-founder Bob Taylor about the current state of the acoustic guitar building industry

Words David Mead
Photography Courtesy of Taylor Guitars



Three of the very special 50th Anniversary models Taylor is releasing (l-r): AD14ce SB LTD, 314ce LTD-BE & 814ce LTD

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF TAYLOR GUITARS

"When I was a young teenager, I loved the idea of playing guitar. At the same time, I was learning how to make things in school 'shop classes..." says Bob Taylor, co-founder of Taylor Guitars. "In my 11th grade high school woodshop class, I made my first guitar as a solo project. I was hooked and never thought again what I'd do with my life. It was settled in my mind."

And so it was that the seed was sown and a life in guitar making was set. It all began in 1973 when Bob took a job at the American Dream music shop in San Diego, owned by Sam Radding. One year later, Sam was set to sell the business and Bob grouped together with his co-workers Kurt Listug and Steve Schemmer to buy the business. Initially, they renamed it the Westland Music Company, changing to Taylor Guitars two years later. Since then, Taylor guitars have found their way into the hands of some of the world's finest players and the brand has become synonymous with the highest-quality instruments available today.

In 2011, Andy Powers joined the company as master guitar builder, introducing new body shapes and, most importantly, the revolutionary V-Class bracing in 2018. "Growing up as a guitar enthusiast in San Diego, it would be impossible for me not to feel admiration for Taylor guitars," Andy, now CEO of the company, tells us. "Initially, like many other players, I appreciated the slimmer neck-carve style and low string height, as those fit my then-small kid hands. I was playing a lot of electric guitar then, so a Taylor neck and setup felt like familiar territory."

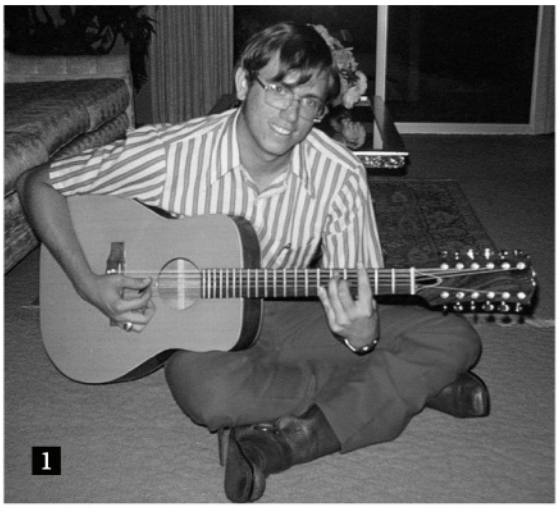
To celebrate the 50th anniversary, Taylor has released a number of special models, including the 814ce Builder's Edition we reviewed in issue 509. Here, we sit down with Bob and Andy to talk about the changes both the company and the industry have seen over the past half-century.

Most contemporary guitar manufacturers employ some elements of automation in production today. What benefits do you think are passed on to guitar players by this 'new' technology?

Andy Powers: "From a broader perspective, the accuracy, consistency, dependability and relative affordability of an instrument made with these modern tools is undeniable. Sure, as both a musician and a builder, coming to the craft of guitar-making from a traditional handcraft approach, it pleases me to sharpen my chisels and set them to a piece of wood. While great instruments can be made using traditional tools, the scale they can be made at is very small. The scale at which great guitars built with extraordinary accuracy can be made using modern tools is astounding, and musicians benefit from that. If that sounds like making good guitars has become easy because we have great tools; I can assure you, it's not. It's a huge challenge to design and implement machines, tools and processes to create instruments. But what a fun challenge!"

"IN MY 11TH GRADE HIGH SCHOOL WOODSHOP CLASS, I MADE MY FIRST GUITAR AS A SOLO PROJECT. I WAS HOOKED" *Bob Taylor*

Bob Taylor: "I love factories. And in the same way good cars come from factories, so do bad cars. It isn't the idea of whether or not a factory is a legitimate way to make something or not – it all boils down to what kind of factory it is. We've built a good factory to make good guitars. I'm constantly defending the idea that guitars don't have to be 'handmade' on a bench to be good."



1. Bob Taylor with the first guitar he ever built – and the fact that it's a 12-string shows a certain level of ambition!

Which parts of the building process are still done by hand at Taylor?

Andy: "Much of the work that goes into a guitar is still done by hand. There are a lot of aspects in instrument making that are subjective and need a decision. From where in a board should a guitar back be cut? What sides best match this back? What is the best way to stain this sunburst? Any task requiring a judgement call inherently is handled by a person trained in that area. Other tasks requiring a combination of finesse, judgement and complex motion are handled by hands: applying binding and purfling work, installing rosettes, sanding, finish, shaping..."

Bob: "All these things that Andy cites are accurate. Again, I will make the analogy of a car factory. If you visit the BMW factory in Munich, you'll see almost nobody in the area where they stamp body parts. And the closer the car gets to completion the more people you'll see. In the end, you'll decide on your own that the cars are handmade. There's an ocean of people making the car, even though there's some crazy automated operations along the way. The Taylor factory is that way. It's only natural. Probably 80 per cent of the guitar is done by a person. The other 20 per cent is done by a person using a fancy machine."

> "ANY TIME A PERSON SEES SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM WHAT THEY'RE USED TO, IT'LL BE MET WITH SOME LEVEL OF SCEPTICISM"
>
> *Andy Powers*

You've championed the use of 'new' tonewoods in your guitars – like Urban Ash, for instance. How hard has it been to draw guitarists away from the mindset that only the traditional woods are good enough in their instruments?

Andy: "Any time a person sees something different from what they're used to, it'll be met with some level of scepticism. That can be a little bit of a challenge, in the same way that convincing a child to try an unfamiliar food can take some time. Often, the experience of playing the instrument and auditioning it on its own merit is all that it takes to change the mind of a player. That tends to happen one player at a time, and therefore requires a lot of building, playing and time to gain broad acceptance in the music community."

Bob: "I like Andy's analogy of teaching a child to try something different. To add to that, if it's 100 kids, some of them will like it without question. Since we're not making every guitar using Urban Ash, we don't have to work too hard to convince everyone. Just offer it and there will be those who love it. In the case of Urban Ash, we've had pretty good success. On the other hand, maple has been used for centuries and is one of our favourite woods yet we have to put a lot of effort into helping people give it a fair chance. It's a wonderful wood, it sounds great, it's available, it has a rich history, and we work hard to tell this story. Go figure."

Taylor's ecological awareness has resulted in its own supply of ebony. How did this come about?

Bob: "Ebony came about when the Lacey Act made it clear that we had to really know how our wood was sourced. Two colleagues at our Spanish tonewood supply partner, Madinter – Vidal de Teresa and Luisa Willsher – presented to me an idea to partner up and buy an existing ebony sawmill in Cameroon. I said yes. We jumped off that cliff together and, boy, has it been a ride! We've learned so much. It even led to the launch of The Ebony Project, which is a non-profit managed by UCLA. We're learning all the scientific data about ebony's ecology as well as how to plant and grow it. I'm proud to say that it's going well."

Then there's Taylor's koa plantation, too.

Bob: "One day, Chris Cosgrove, who purchases Taylor's wood around the world, sent me a real estate ad for a large property in Hawaii advertising ownership of a koa forest. He said, 'Maybe we should buy a forest!' I forwarded that to my friend Steve McMinn at Pacific Rim Tonewoods and posed the same question. Steve said, 'I'll find out.' A month later he said, 'Yes, good idea – but not that forest.' And Paniolo Tonewoods was born. It's a partnership between PRT and Taylor; we've since renamed it Siglo Tonewoods. We're doing fine work there in Hawaii and planting a lot of koa trees."

Possibly the most radical change in acoustic guitar design is your V-Class bracing, Andy.

Andy: "This idea arrived shortly after introducing our redesigned 800 Series in the winter of 2014. We'd nearly

2. Bob Taylor (left) and business partner Kurt Listug in 1985 in the early days of the company

3. The Taylor PS14ce LTD is another of the company's special limited editions to celebrate its landmark 50th anniversary

4. The intricate inlay work on the fretboard is absolutely first class

5. Check out the incredibly ornate bound headstock and Gotoh luxury tuners

3

4

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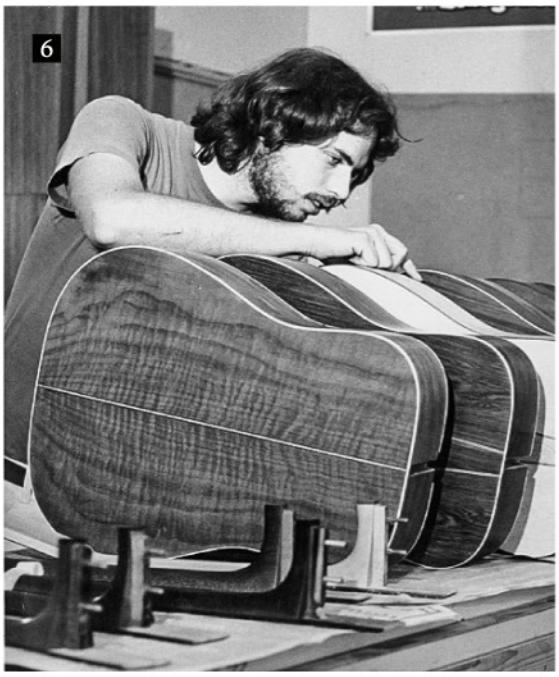


6. Bob Taylor has witnessed many changes in manufacture from the early hand-built days, to a certain level of automation. "We've built a good factory to make good guitars," he says

turned our factory upside-down in order to wring every bit of tone from the flagship guitar designs and finally got them into the hands of players. It occurred to me that we couldn't go any further down the same development path without achieving only diminishing returns for our effort and therefore needed a totally different approach if we wanted to continue pursuing an ever-better guitar. Against that backdrop, I took some inspiration from a series of experiences around that time and applied those into what became the V-Class design, which in hindsight, isn't hard to recognise as a synthesis of flat-top, archtop, mandolin and classical guitar designs."

Finishing has always been a controversial subject among luthiers, with nitro, acrylic, French polish, poly, and so on, all featuring in the debate. What are your feelings about the best finish for an acoustic?

Andy: "One common theme among all styles of finish material is that as the finish is made thinner, the differences between finish materials are less significant. If a finish is very thick, the difference between materials is even more apparent, and the damping factor is very high, to the potential detriment of the guitar. As the finish becomes thinner, you won't hear as much difference between materials – simply because there's less of it – and the damping the finish imparts is lower. Interestingly, low or no damping isn't the greatest thing, either.

"THE V-CLASS [BRACING] DESIGN ISN'T HARD TO RECOGNISE AS A SYNTHESIS OF FLAT-TOP, ARCHTOP, MANDOLIN AND CLASSICAL GUITAR DESIGNS" *Andy Powers*

"An interesting experience is to hear a guitar with no finish on it whatsoever. That typically will have a brash, harsh sound as the inharmonious parts of a guitar's vibration are not dampened away. Some vibration damping is welcome, even necessary, similar to the way a sensitive microphone needs a shock mount to isolate it from the vibration travelling through the floor or stand. Too much vibration isn't good. Harmonic, musical vibration is."

7. Andy Powers introduced V-Class bracing – "a new sonic engine" – to Taylor acoustics in 2018

Bob: "When every guitar maker used nitrocellulose lacquer, there was no controversy. When every guitar neck had a dovetail joint, there was no controversy. That joint only became argued to be the best when I bolted on a neck. Same with finish. Controversy started when Taylor dropped using nitrocellulose lacquer. My bottom line is, as Andy says, thin is best. Some is better than none. The rest is opinion, not fact."

How do you feel about the practice of pre-worn or 'relic' finishes on acoustics?

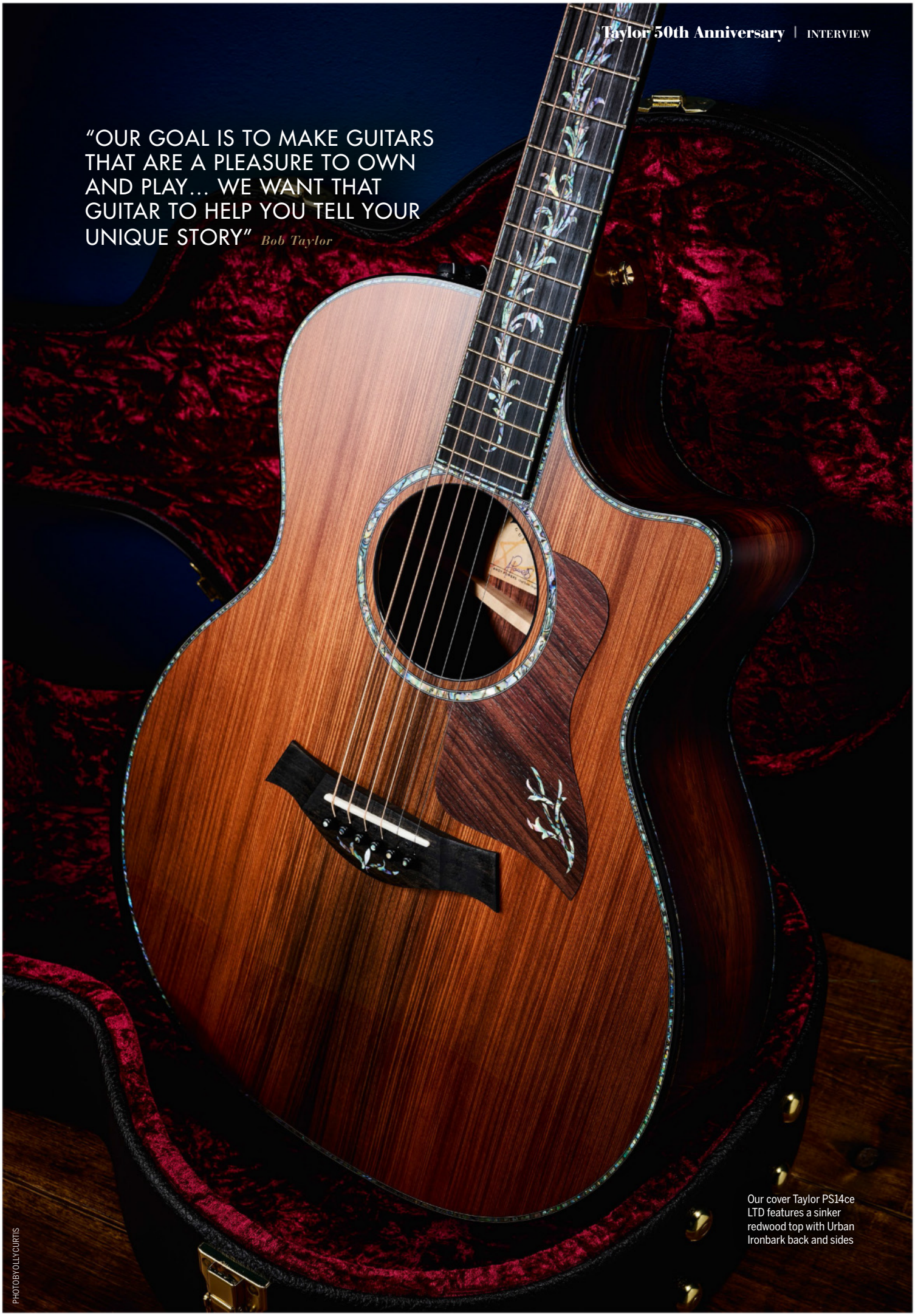
Andy: "Aesthetically and philosophically, I tend to like what I describe as honest wear on a guitar, resulting from a musician's use. I've seen some great examples of pre-distressed finishes, finishes intended to show wear quickly, but I most appreciate when a player takes the instrument, plays it all the time, and appreciates the story it tells as it ages."

Bob: "I've seen some great relic jobs on electric guitars. To me, it's an art form. More power to them. To do it well is hard. To appreciate it is legit. It's an art form that I'm not interested in doing on Taylors."

Did the success of the American Dream Series come as a surprise? And are there plans to enhance the range still further?

Andy: "The success of the spartan American Dream guitars didn't come as a surprise to me – musical inspiration has never been reserved exclusively for the luxurious instrument. Sure, a beautiful guitar with exquisite details is nice. Who wouldn't love something lavish for a personal instrument to hold and play? But a great-sounding/feeling instrument is something that can transport a player into a dynamic experience, regardless of the sophistication of its ornamentation and trimmings."

Bob: "The timing was right. They came when our Tecate [Baja California, Mexico] factory was closed for Covid. We wanted people to have a guitar to buy in a price range they could afford. The design was very good. Thank you, Andy!"



"OUR GOAL IS TO MAKE GUITARS THAT ARE A PLEASURE TO OWN AND PLAY… WE WANT THAT GUITAR TO HELP YOU TELL YOUR UNIQUE STORY" *Bob Taylor*

Our cover Taylor PS14ce LTD features a sinker redwood top with Urban Ironbark back and sides

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

8. Taylor's ecological outlook has seen the company source its own supply of ebony as well as establishing a plantation of koa in Hawaii

There's no doubt that the development of pickup systems for acoustic guitars revolutionised their use on stage, as it was pretty much a hit and miss affair previously. Taylor's Expression System 2 differs from the typical under-saddle variety – could you talk us through that?

Andy: "The basis for this design was to use piezoelectric crystals to gather vibrational energy from the saddle and convert it to an electrical signal, but to do it within the natural dynamic range of piezo crystal. As piezo material is compressed, it becomes more polarised, and variations in the pressure will result in more or less polarisation. The material has an upper limit to how much pressure it can respond to, and downward string tension is commonly higher than this limit, overloading the potential dynamic output of the piezo. By placing the piezo behind the saddle and controlling the pressure, the piezo material can respond within its natural dynamic range for great detail in its output."

"IT'S ALWAYS A THRILL TO SEE MUSICIANS EVOLVE, AND WE LOVE BUILDING INSTRUMENTS TO MEET THEM ALONG THEIR MUSICAL JOURNEY"

Andy Powers

Bob: "Taylor designer Dave Hosler, now retired, conceived this design to do what Andy just described. It wasn't easy to build. But we made a small factory to do it. I love the sound. Some people think of the saddle as bouncing up and down, but it really rocks forward and backward. This pickup senses that direction of motion, thus the tone is different from an under-saddle pickup. Imagine this: tie a rope to a wall. Stand back and stretch it tight with your hands holding on for dear life. Make it as tight as you can. Now have your friend pull the middle of the rope to the side. What happens to you? When he pulls, you move forward. When he relaxes, you move back. It's how a string pulls on a saddle."

With a notable resurgence in acoustic guitar music via folk, blues, Americana and so on, what plans does Taylor have for the future?

Andy: "Our plan is to continue doing what we've always done – build great instruments that fit the needs of musicians so they can continue to create music they and their audiences enjoy. It's always a thrill to see musicians continue to evolve and develop their styles and repertoires, and we love building instruments to meet them along their musical journey."

Bob: "Our goal is to make guitars that are a pleasure to own and play. Guitars that come in different shapes, sizes and tonal flavours. Guitars that have good intonation and can play with modern instruments like electric keyboards with pure, accurate notes and also blend with all its normal stringed brethren. Guitars that can be adjusted and repaired since we already know they can have 100 birthdays and will need some love along the way. Guitars that can be your friend, whether you're a Nashville cat, a Brit or Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City, we want that guitar to hold up and help you tell your unique story." G

www.taylorguitars.com

BUYER'S GUIDE

Taylor Guitars

As the brand hits its 50th birthday, Taylor has something to offer at every budget

Words Stuart Williams

TAYLOR BABY TAYLOR £431

The Baby Taylor delivers a true three-quarter-size dreadnought, with a scale length of 578mm (22.75 inches), and it can still project thanks to its solid top – spruce (pictured), mahogany or koa – and arched sapele back (laminated). Each variant of the Baby Taylor comes as either an acoustic or ES-B-equipped electro (£599), so whether it's a first acoustic for a smaller player, or an alternative for travel or different tunings, the Baby continues to prove its place.

TAYLOR AD24ce £2,375

Want a US-made Taylor Grand Auditorium but at a lower price point? Look no further than the American Dream Series. This Grand Auditorium model ticks a lot of boxes for less with a neo-tropical mahogany top and neck, sapele back and sides and ES2 electronics. Taylor could easily have reverted to traditional bracing as a cost-saving measure, but here we get the V-Class bracing included to boot. Make no mistake: the price might be lower, but this is every bit a Taylor.

TAYLOR 50TH ANNIVERSARY 814ce BUILDER'S EDITION £5,939

Taylor is quite literally pushing the boat out for its 50th anniversary with this sinker redwood-top model; that is, a log that's been submerged in Californian river water for decades, resulting in a tone that Taylor describes as "cedar on steroids". Add to that Indian rosewood back and sides, neo-tropical mahogany neck with ebony 'board, V-Class bracing, bevelled cutaway and ES2 electronics.

TAYLOR GS MINI-e MAHOGANY £875

If you're after a sofa strummer, you don't need to compromise on quality. Taylor's GS-Mini scales down the Grand Symphony shape for an incredibly joyful playing experience with a solid top in a choice of woods, laminate back and sides, optional electronics (ES-B system built in or retrofit ES-Go pickup), plus you get a great-quality gigbag for lugging it around in. This shrunken Taylor is equipped to handle pretty much anything you throw at it.

TAYLOR 12-STRING 352ce £2,699

There are few things more satisfying in guitar playing than the vibrant jangle of a 12-string acoustic. This is enhanced further on the Taylor 352ce, which comes fitted with the excellent V-Class bracing for even more resonance. Elsewhere, it's got all the Taylor hallmarks including a Grand Concert-shaped sapele body, Sitka spruce top and mahogany neck, with Taylor's ES2 Expression System taking care of the electronics.

TAYLOR K24ce £7,559

Bob Taylor has the utmost respect for wood, and that's followed closely by his passion for sustainability, which is where the Koa Series comes in. Designed to highlight Hawaiian koa's ability to look and sound great, while also being sourced responsibly, the K24ce is all-koa and all-solid at the body, with tropical mahogany for the neck and West African Crelicam ebony on the fingerboard. V-Class bracing, ES-2 electronics and a beautiful Spring Vine inlay seal the deal.

VIDEO!

For a detailed look at Mike's pedalboard & effects, check out our exclusive video by heading over to **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A new album, a collaboration with Periphery and a touring schedule that would make many artists weep are all in a day's work for Mike Dawes, one of the world's foremost percussive guitar specialists

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis

Playing acoustic guitar has come a long way since singer-songwriters perched themselves in front of a microphone on stage, hoping their manual dexterity and fingerpicking finesse would reach the audience via the sound engineer and an often inadequate PA system. These days, the world's concert halls are no place for the technophobe, either, as the instrument and its peripheral gear have become far more sophisticated.

But very few players have embraced this brave new dawn more readily than Mike Dawes. Not only is he an undoubted acoustic guitar virtuoso, he also tours with a thoroughly space-age setup that stuns audiences worldwide. After spending years on the road touring with players like Justin Hayward, Tommy Emmanuel and math-rockers Periphery, his live show is one of the wonders of the modern age. In between finishing a UK tour and on the eve of flying back out to Las Vegas to record a video for his forthcoming album, Mike stopped by the *Guitarist* studios to offer us a window on his performing world.

How did the tour go?

"The tour with Justin was fantastic. I think most of the shows ended up being sold out, which is a testament to the Moody Blues' music, how popular Justin is and how many fans he has over here. And it was interesting to see a lot of guitar players at the shows as well. It's always fun playing in the UK because I don't play here a lot – and that's not through any particular reason other than the Americans keep dragging me over there, which is obviously lovely. But it's been so nice to reconnect with the UK and see a lot of friends and family on the road as well. And hopefully it's the start of me touring here a lot more, you know?"

Are you still opening the show, playing your own solo material, as well as performing in the band?

"Yeah, I've been previewing some tunes from my next album. Then I'd run backstage, change the guitar tuning and come out and play all the Moody Blues hits. This particular setlist was my favourite that Justin has done. We spent about six days rehearsing before the tour and we integrated a Moody Blues deep-cut medley into the show, playing some really, really cool songs. So it was a very fresh, exciting set."

Regarding your own material, you have a new album in the pipeline.

"The album title is not announced yet, but it will be released this summer, around July time. Currently, I'm collaborating with the band Periphery on two acoustic songs for a double-single that will be released on seven-inch vinyl in early May. That will be the next video and first official single from the new album. But the new solo album is my first since 2017, which was *Era*.

"I'm honestly so happy with it; I'm going to be releasing it on special-edition splatter vinyl. It's 11 songs, some of which people know – things like my *Jump* arrangement, my *Everlong* arrangement, that have been out there recently. I'm so proud of it. Not just the original compositions, which will be drip fed throughout the summer, but the arrangements and production. It's the solo acoustic record that's a culmination of 10 years of experience, touring, writing and working with other artists."

Let's talk about playing live. To begin with, you're known for having a pedalboard about the size of Heathrow...

"Well, Terminal 5 maybe... [laughs]. It's not that big! It's just bigger than a lot of acoustic players' and it definitely looks like crap, but I like that it looks homemade because it is. I made it with my dad with a bit of plywood and some Velcro. I flirted with a more professional-looking 'board on the Periphery tour, but went back to my dad's cracked, Velcro-covered piece of plywood. It just sounds great.

"In this very aesthetic world that we live in, where everything is very outwardly presented, and everything's very 'social media' and very clean and very curated, I like the idea that a functioning sort of 'Tonehenge', if you will, is made on a piece of plywood covered in Velcro. It kind of goes in line with the whole solo acoustic guitar thing. It's electronics, but there's something grassroots about it, you know? Little bits of fluff that get picked up from Basingstoke will remain for years to come."

We'll go into more detail regarding the effects in a moment, but the first link in the chain has to be your signature Cuntz guitar.

"I've been playing my Andreas Cuntz signature guitar since I got it in 2016. I do have another Cuntz, a koa model, which has a few little quirks. It has banjo tuners on it and I've used it for a few tunes that I did with Tommy [Emmanuel] and a few tunes on the new album. But my main guitar is the Indian Rose signature and that guitar has four pickups in it. I want to tell people that they do not need four pickups in their guitar! This guitar needs four pickups, everyone else should have three.

"There's a reason this needs the fourth pickup: the pickups are categorised into different kinds of sonic purposes. The traditional under-the-bridge plate piezo is the main acoustic guitar sound live. The magnetic soundhole pickup, which I designed with DiMarzio and called

The Black Angel, is to just pick up the strings. What that allows me to do is use electric guitar effects and things that would maybe be hindered by the sound of a wooden box or any external vibrations. So I run just the electric guitar effects through that pickup – things like an octave pedal, an amp simulator, a Whammy pedal and the tuner.

"The third pickup is a microphone from a K&K Trinity system, just the microphone because I've wired in a different piezo made by a company called Schatten – their HFN pickup – because I liked it better than the K&K Trinity. There's a thumb-wheel in the soundhole that controls the volume of the microphone because some songs require more microphone and some songs require less.

"The fourth pickup is exclusive to the signature Cuntz guitar and that is another Schatten pickup called the Dualie [Insider] and it's just a little contact pickup, similar to a Shadow transducer or something like that. It's just in the area where I do the 'bass drum' sound. So we've got the acoustic guitar, electric guitar, percussion and kick drum."

Moving back to the effects, you have your pedalboard wired in a very specific way. Tell us how you do it.

"Well, the first thing I plug into is a mixer because you can have a maximum of two pickups coming out of one hole on your guitar. I have two holes in the guitar, so I have two stereo outputs. They then get split through a very long cable and go into different channels on the mixer, so I can set the levels and the EQ. From there two things happen: I have a mixer with what's called 'auxiliary sends and returns' and what that means is I can send the signal from – say, the magnetic soundhole pickup – out of an output into a guitar pedal and then back into its own channel on the mixing desk. And I can do that multiple times.

"What I've ended up with by doing that is I'm sending the signal out into the pedal and then back into its own channel, so I also get to set the level and mix and EQ and play with those guitar pedals as well. You know, it's like some pedals sound great, but I wish I could EQ them a little bit. Well, you can; you can send it back into the mixer and EQ it. And then, at the end of that process, the main outputs of that mixer just go out to the front-of-house.

"I have mentioned about the auxiliary outputs and I have another one for the 'kick drum pickup', and I send that straight to front-of-house so they have control over the kick drum. They can actually isolate it completely, send it to the subwoofers [in the PA] and get the best kick drum sound that they can for that room. Basically, it's getting four pickups, turning them into an acoustic guitar, a kick drum, an electric guitar, giving the electric guitar a few special effects, and then sending it all out."

Would you say the live stage feels like home to you now?

"Well, since 2013 when my first album [*What Just Happened?*] came out, I've been touring about 10 or 11 months of every year, which is a lot. It's almost Tommy levels! Because, like many people in their early 20s who grew up in a small town, you want to see the world, you want to play music. And that's what being a musician was: it was hitting the road and having adventures and all of that. Now we exist in a time where technology has allowed people to be professional musicians just from sitting at home and filming themselves and putting it on the internet, being a YouTuber, or music commentator, or whatever it may be.

"No matter what I try to do from home, I just have to play live concerts. It's an addiction that I don't see really going anywhere. It's a problem because now I'm at an age where I want to take care of my family or I want to see friends or see my partner and things like that. It's a work/life balance I'm trying to work on in terms of being away, but I just don't get the same enjoyment from doing anything else with the guitar except for playing shows. I just love playing to people, I love meeting people, I get very extroverted when I'm on the road and just like to meet people, you know?

> ***"Since 2013 when my first album came out, I've been touring about 10 or 11 months of every year. Almost Tommy levels!"***

"I feel that it's a real shame that there's a whole generation of people out there now who just don't really know what that feels like because they're just so used to everything being digitised. And that's not a judgmental statement; it's just that I'm wired differently because I started this at a different time. A lot has changed in 10 years in terms of what it means to be a musician. I'm 34 now, and maybe I don't count as an old dog, but it's very hard to teach me new tricks at this point, as I've just been on the road that much.

"So yes, the short answer to your question is that being on the road is where it's at for me, personally. I think that's why it's taken so long to get another album done!"

Mike's guitar features four different pickups, each serving an aspect of his live sound

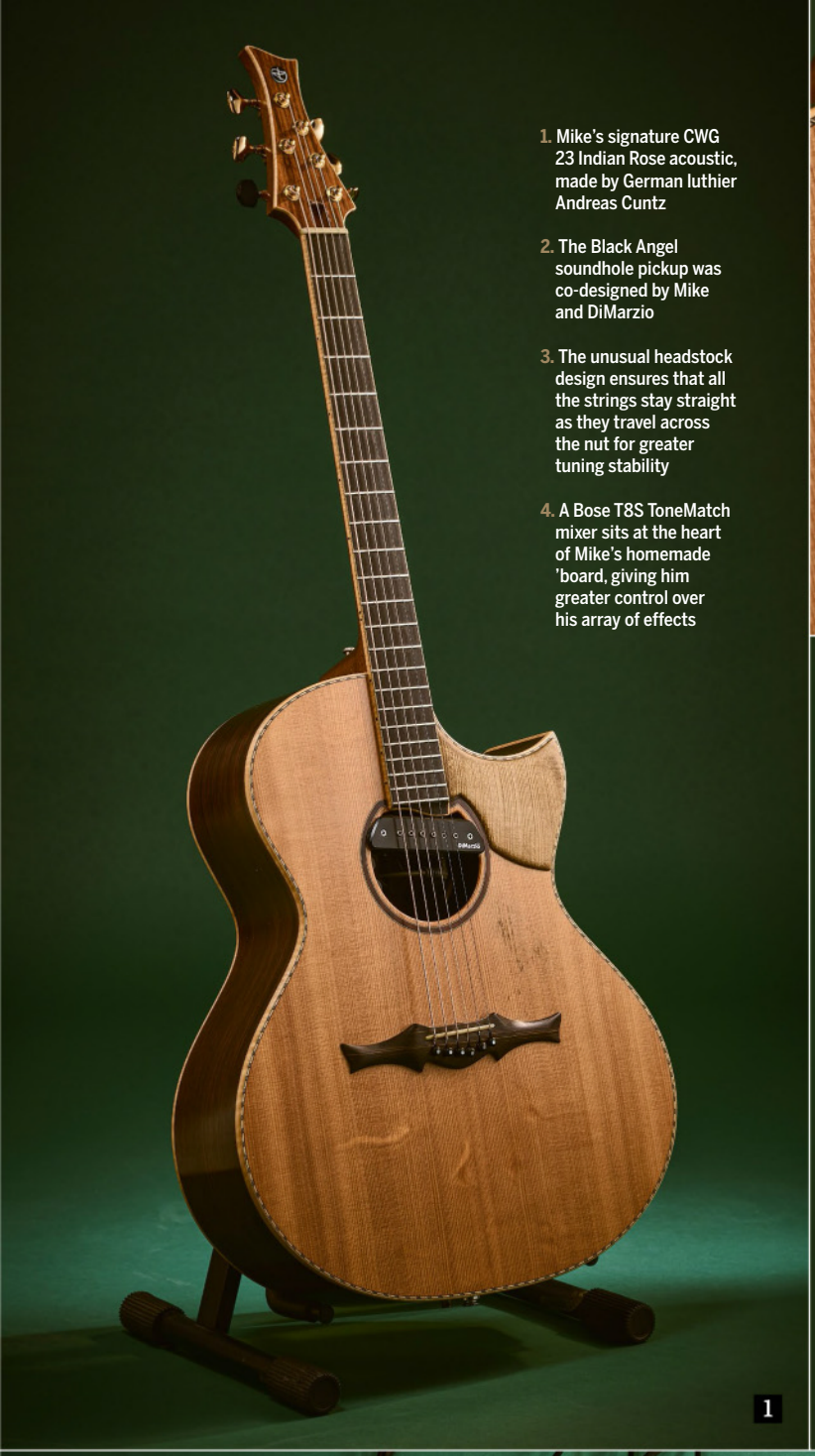
Mike Dawes' as yet untitled new album will be released during the summer of 2024
www.mikedawes.com

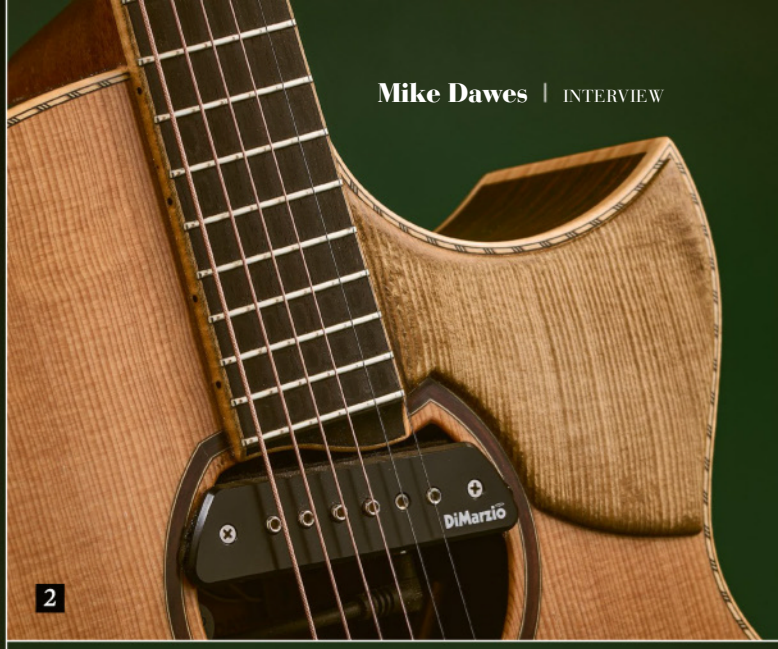
1. Mike's signature CWG 23 Indian Rose acoustic, made by German luthier Andreas Cuntz

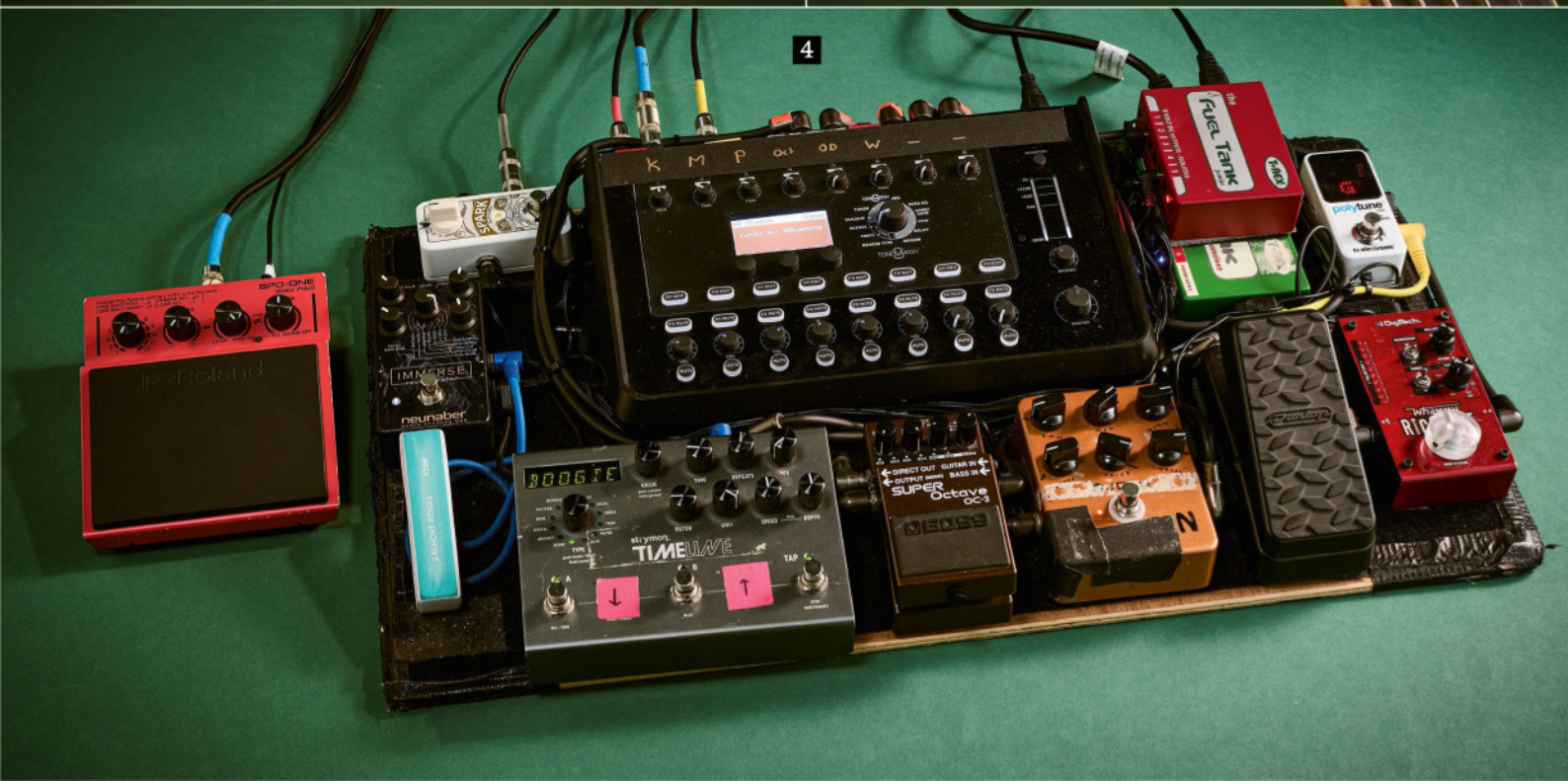
2. The Black Angel soundhole pickup was co-designed by Mike and DiMarzio

3. The unusual headstock design ensures that all the strings stay straight as they travel across the nut for greater tuning stability

4. A Bose T8S ToneMatch mixer sits at the heart of Mike's homemade 'board, giving him greater control over his array of effects







PEAK PERFORMANCE

From honing your creativity to eradicating erroneous string noise, Tommy Emmanuel explains how to set the bar high for yourself in the studio and on stage

Words Neil Crossley & Jamie Dickson **Photography** Olly Curtis

Tommy Emmanuel has been a working professional musician from the somewhat staggering age of six, when he toured his native Australia playing rhythm guitar in his family's band, living on the road in their cars and rarely going to school. He was inspired to play after hearing the Travis picking style of Chet Atkins on the radio, a lightbulb moment and one that he still remembers vividly.

Six decades on, Tommy is widely regarded as one of the world's finest acoustic fingerstyle players, a guitarist whose emotive playing and impeccable feel are matched by his sublimely dextrous technique. He sets the bar high for himself, and his incendiary live shows regularly wow audiences in venues across the globe. Who better, then, to offer advice on how to hone your technique, your creative processes and your entire mental attitude when venturing out to the studio and the live circuit?

Once you've got some material together and you're thinking about going into the studio, what do you do to make sure that, when you start tracking, you're able to freely express yourself with the music?

"Well, it's all about the homework you've already done. I have to be absolutely in love with the song and know that this is a song that I want to record. I write songs and record them on my iPhone and that's my demo. That song, in every way, has to stand up and once I'm certain of that, then when I go to the studio, I'm in heaven.

"It's really all about the quality of the music and your belief that everything about the song is as strong as you can get it. Once I feel that every part, every minute detail, is right and that the song does what I need it to do, it satisfies me in every way, once I'm certain of that, then okay, 'Boom!' I'm ready to go. My guitar's got good strings on it, it's in tune, we've got good microphones, I'm wearing headphones, I can hear a little reverb or whatever. I've got the sound of my dreams in my ears.

"Now I'm going to play the song to the best of my abilities, with the best time, the best feeling. That's really the bottom line. I never go into the studio unprepared."

PHOTO BY MAIRO CINQUETTI/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

Tommy fired up on stage at the Bambu Festival, Italy in 2022

Tommy's Maton Custom Shop acoustic differs from his standard signature EGB808TE model in that it has a jumbo-sized body

What do you do if or when you encounter a phrase that will make the strings squeak?
"You know what? All arrangements have that in them. What you've got to do is practise a lot more. You've got to play that thing a thousand times until you iron out all the noises, until you can play it fluidly, so it just flows along. There are no shortcuts or easy ways. There's only getting it right."

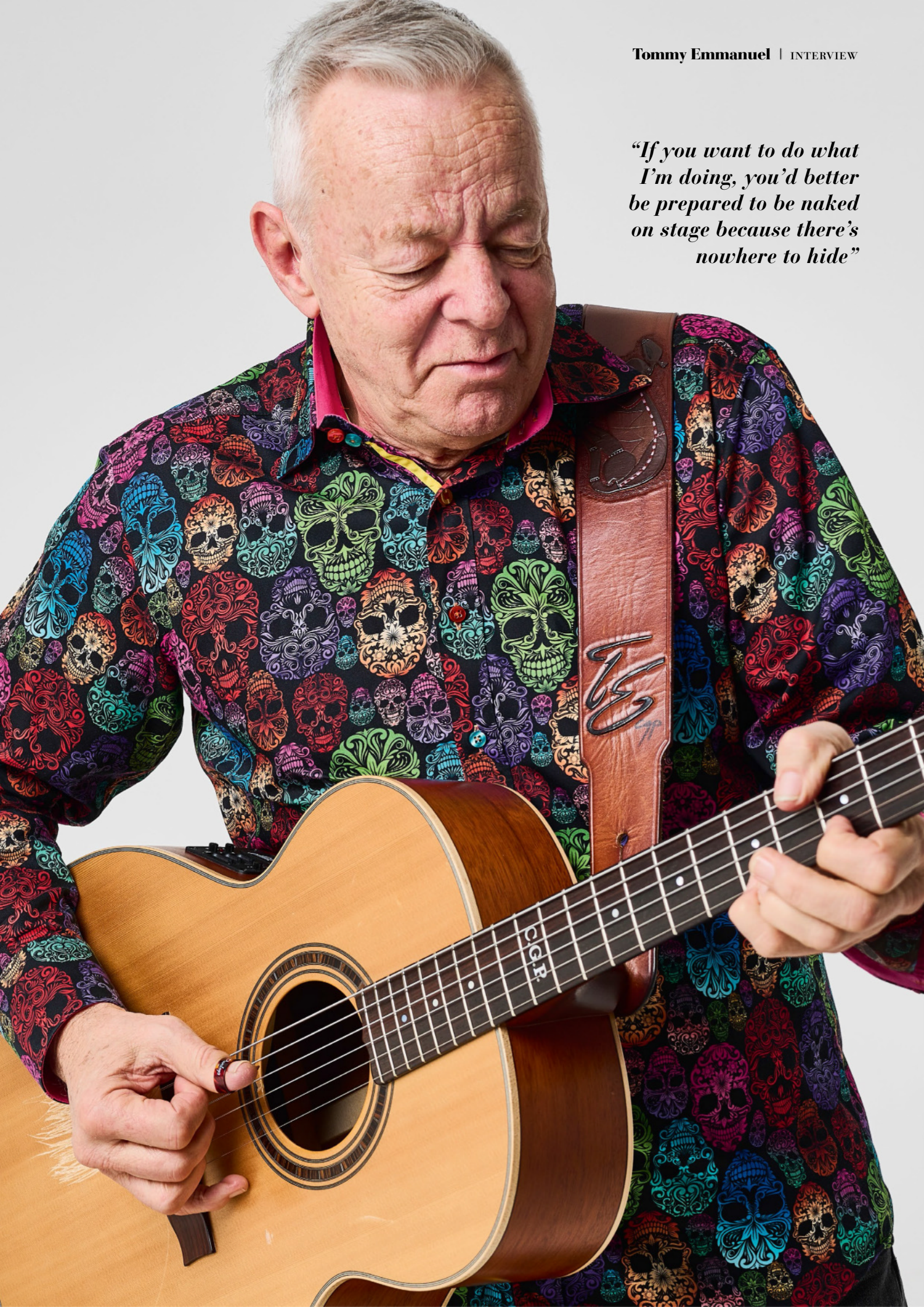
There's always the one track, especially if you're playing it live, where you think, 'Oh, this is the really tricky one, this is the one that's got that long stretch that sometimes trips me up.' Is that just a case of focusing as well, or do you rewrite your way around it?
"If there's a song I've written and there's a part in it that I don't really feel 100 per cent about, I usually get rid of it. I usually write something else that's better. I never think, 'Oh, I'm writing a fingerstyle song.' I always think I'm trying to write the best song I can with this idea I've got. So I never feel constrained by being a solo player.

"I always imagine that I'm trying to write a hit record. I'm trying to write something that I want to hear over and over: that's the feeling we're looking for. How many thousands and thousands of times have I heard *Penny Lane*? But I could hear it again right now because that song does it for me."

Some acoustic guitars feel like they really tend to love certain tunings. Do you keep guitars for particular tunings?
"I have three basic guitars with three different tunings. My main guitar, that I use on stage, is always in normal tuning; I don't play anything at all in DADGAD. I have another guitar with bigger strings on it that is tuned down a whole step. Then I usually do it in drop D so it's down to C and I play ballads and tunes that I've written with that lower, more beautiful-sounding tuning. And then the third guitar is a real traditional-sounding cutaway that I usually use the G6 tuning [for] or just drop D.

"The other thing is that I'm a touring concert artist, so I've got to say everything that I want to say in an hour and a half maximum and I've got to give it hell, give people the best time of their lives, play the best I can, keep it interesting, keep the tones interesting, make sure I'm perfectly in tune, I'm perfectly in time. So if a guitar is not doing it for me, I just leave it at home; find the ones that do."

"If you want to do what I'm doing, you'd better be prepared to be naked on stage because there's nowhere to hide"



What advice do you have for those who are new to the stage as solo fingerstyle acoustic guitarists? If you've always been in bands with electric guitars, for example, you've got quite a lot of cover there, haven't you?

"Exactly [laughs]. Well, that's why I tell people, 'If you want to do what I'm doing, you'd better be prepared to be naked on stage because there's nowhere to hide.' Everything is exposed. So if you want to be doing well at that, you'd better get to work on it. You better do it a lot, find all the weak spots and get rid of them.

"I need my guitar to be awesome every single time I walk on stage. I need my tuning to be the greatest, the most in tune that satisfies my really picky ear, all that sort of stuff. You know what works and you're always diligent about your tuning, your strings, your action and then your material choice."

When you've got a flowing piece of fingerstyle acoustic to play, every single piece is essential. So if you fluff one section, it feels like there's no safety net there. Is the only strategy to that to just routine it as often as possible in front of people and drive out those demons of doubt?

"Yeah, that's it. I mean, the truth is, we're not machines. So some days I play things better than I played the last time I played it. And I don't know why that is. And there are some days where I think, 'Oh God, I feel like I've got lead in my fingers, I'm playing so slow.' Then I watch a video of that very same performance a week later and it's fast as hell. It was my perspective on it at that moment.

"We vary. What I aim for is trying to be consistent. You know, trying to, even on my worst day, still play something that gives people a great time [so] that hopefully, people won't sense that I'm struggling or that I'm not in the zone.

"So much of it is about what's going on in our minds and that's a dangerous area. If I let my mind wander, that's a bad thing: I'm playing a song and [I think], 'Have I played two bridges or have I played three choruses, not two?' You can't let that happen. You've got to find a way of staying absolutely 100 per cent present when you're playing."

Tommy's playful nature and sunny demeanour belie his unshakable work ethic: "There are no shortcuts. There's only getting it right"

There are going to be days when you feel like you're grinding through something, even if other people don't detect it, and then the days when everything flows and you just cannot make a mistake. It's literally like you're better than your best day, which is a battle as well...

"[Laughs] The older I get, the more I go, 'Oh man, it was the most incredible night. Oh shit, now we gotta try and top it again tomorrow night. How are we gonna do that?' And you've just got to know that you're human. There's gonna be cracks and there's gonna be days when you make the most stupid mistakes because you got cocky or because you stopped being 100 per cent concentrated. It's just part of being a human being. So I try to make that happen as [little] as possible, you know? And try not to get angry at myself. What I've got to do is say, 'Right, here's why. All right, I accept that. Now, tomorrow I'm gonna try harder.' And that's all I can do."

"Be honest with your audience. Every day I'm nervous, but... there's no judge and jury out there, they're all in your head"

As a dedicated educator as well as a performer, Tommy often leads workshops for acoustic students

The reassuring thought with music is that, at the end of the day, if you're a guitarist and you screw up, everyone moves on.

"Well, exactly. I mean, there are times, if things are not going well, I'll sit and tell the audience that I'm struggling or that, you know, 'I came out here full of vim and vigour and now I'm really struggling. But I'm going to tell you this because it makes me feel better that I'm honest with you. And that I'm just human like everybody else. So let me try this.' And I'll play something else and people will applaud and people will be with you. That's why I always tell students, when you go on stage, you'd better be honest with your audience. And every day I'm nervous, but I'm going to do the best I can and everybody will be with you. There's no judge and jury out there, they're all in your head."

Tommy Emmanuel's latest album, *Accomplice Two*, is out now on Slimstyle Records **www.tommyemmanuel.com**

BUYER'S GUIDE

Stage Acoustics

When it's time to plug in, these stage-ready acoustics won't leave you howling

Words Stuart Williams

TAKAMINE GD34CE BLK £619

This black electro-cutaway is based on the stadium-filling acoustic used by Bon Jovi and Springsteen, and with solid spruce for the top and laminated sapele back and sides, it's ready to be amplified by the TP-3G preamp, which sprinkles everything with a bit of studio-style tonality. For those about to rock (sensitively), it's got great sounds and looks to match.
www.takamine.com

CORDOBA STAGE £624

If you're playing a nylon-string live, make this your first stop, allowing you to amplify without the race to beat feedback. It does so via a mahogany-backed, chambered thinline body, topped with solid spruce. The neck has an electric-friendly 406mm (16-inch) radius, and the electronics – co-designed with Fishman – blend two body sensors with an under-saddle pickup for extra detail.
www.cordobaguitars.com

FENDER HIGHWAY SERIES DREADNOUGHT £919

With a shallow body depth of 57mm, the Highway Series was born to work on stages. It's got a mahogany back and sides, spruce or mahogany top, and the familiarity of a C-shape profile and 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length. The dual-sensor system lets you blend big, boomy sounds with a more cutting tone: it's an excellent all-rounder for smaller ensembles and full-band settings alike.
www.fender.com

MARTIN SC-10E £1,375

Martin's boundary-pushing SC-10E presents an offset body made from koa back and sides with a spruce top (although an all-sapele version is also available), while the proprietary Sure Align neck and wide cutaway give you unhindered access to the upper frets, all feeling closer to your electric. It's powered by a Fishman MX-T system, snug and discreet in the soundhole.
www.martinguitar.com

GODIN A6 ULTRA £1,999

Godin's 'hybrid' acoustic has an electric-like 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length and chambered maple/basswood single-cut body; it even has a magnetic humbucker. But sat beneath the strings is an under-saddle pickup that yields entirely acoustic sounds. There are dual outputs, or you can blend the pickups, and you get three-band EQ for the acoustic sounds, two-band for the electric.
www.godinguitars.com

TAYLOR T5z CLASSIC DLX £3,035

Taylor's T5z continues to push the 'hybrid' concept to far-reaching possibilities. Joining the thin, hollow body and slimline neck are a body sensor on the underside of the top, a concealed neck humbucker and a stacked humbucker dressed up as a lipstick-style single coil at the bridge. As such, the five-way selector covers a lot of ground, everything from pure acoustic to amp'd-up electric lead tones.
www.taylorguitars.com

QUALITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
★ Original ★
HISTORIC HARDWARE
100% GUARANTEED
★★★

LIVING LARGE

The J-200 is Gibson's most iconic flat-top and these vintage examples include one of the first ever made and the very last acoustic Gibson to be manufactured in Kalamazoo

Words Huw Price **Photography** Adam Gasson

Sometimes referred to as a 'narrow waist jumbo', the J-200 is the model that unites Roy Rogers with Elvis, Pete Townshend, Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Yusuf/Cat Stevens, Noel Gallagher and countless others. Since the very first one was presented to Ray Whitley in December 1937, it has been a constant in Gibson's product line barring a brief pause during America 's participation in WWII.

Ray Whitley was a singing cowboy film star during the 1930s. When appearing at the Madison Square Garden rodeo, he got together with Guy Hart from Gibson to discuss ideas for a new acoustic guitar model. Ray's dream guitar was a flat-top version of Gibson's flagship 17-inch L-5 archtop, and he spent a week at the factory helping to design it. As a stage performer, Ray also wanted his guitar to be eye-catching and Gibson obliged with a sunburst finish, gold hardware, a fancy 'moustache' bridge and multi-layer black/white binding applied to the body. The neck and headstock were also bound and the 'cloud' fretboard inlays were specially made. The celluloid pickguard's shape was derived from the Super 400 and adorned with an engraved border and flower motifs.

At first, the model designation was 'Super Jumbo', which differentiated Ray's guitar from the smaller 'Advanced Jumbo' model that Gibson made between 1936 and 1938. In 1939, the name was altered to Super Jumbo 200, and the designation SJ-200 was subsequently used until 1955 when it was shortened to J-200.

Pre-WWII SJ-200

This model's case screams jazz-age Gibson and its tweed covering and contrasting black-and-red stripes resemble an EH-185 amplifier. Inside is a pink velour lining and a metal name badge reading 'Geib, Chicago'. Assuming this is the original case, it's still in great shape and it's kept this rosewood and spruce SJ-200 in remarkable condition.

A mystery over the exact manufacturing date arises because no serial number or FON stamp can be seen and certain details don't conform to the usual feature timeline. Up until 1941, Gibson fitted ebony fretboards with a pointed shape at the soundhole end, and this example has both. They also changed to pearloid

The SJ-200 sounds utterly huge with very deep and punchy bass, strong mids and clear highs

tulip-buttoned tuners, but here we see the earlier 'stair step' Grover imperials. The bridge confuses the issue because pre-1941 SJ-200s should have six individually adjustable threaded bone saddles. Instead, this example has the later straight bone saddle. There is no evidence of the bridge having been altered, but the lightness of the sunburst may offer clues.

Very early SJ-200s tend to have dark sunbursts, but this one looks like most of the red has faded away to leave the shading tints over a deep amber base coat. It's exactly what has happened to the aniline red of so many late 1950s Les Pauls, so it could be that the guitar was sent back to Gibson for a refinish and the bridge was changed at the same time. Until relatively recently, it was common for professional musicians to return their stage guitars to the original manufacturer for refurbishment. But the finish is several decades old and some lacquer chips around the bridge may indicate that it's simply a very faded original finish with a replaced bridge.

The pickguard could also be an area of concern due to the absence of an engraved border. Gibson dispensed with the border in 1955, but a video with 'Ranger Doug' Green playing Rosalie Allen's 1938 Gibson SJ-200 clearly shows that her pickguard was border-free, too, so we need to look inside.

A trio of jumbos (top to bottom): 1984 J-200, the last to have been made at Kalamazoo; a 'magic year' 1959 J-200; and a pre-WWII SJ-200, thought to have be manufactured between 1939 and 1941

1. Grover Imperial 'stair step' tuners were fitted to SJ-200s prior to 1941, and the brass number plate may have been added to replace the original strap hook

2. Early SJ-200 models had six individually adjustable saddles, so this bridge could be a replacement or one of the very first straight-saddle versions

The earliest SJ-200s had two 128-degree X braces, with one supporting the bridge and the other the upper bout. Two transverse 'ladder' braces were also fixed behind the lower-bout X brace. In 1941, Gibson changed to a single X brace with angled tone bars but reverted to the double X with ladder bars around 1952. Considering the combination of double X-bracing, Indian rosewood back and sides, ebony fretboard, pre-1948 style headstock binding, script logo and tuners, all the evidence suggests this SJ-200 was made prior to 1941. The 17-inch body width and centre strip 'zipper' inlay were introduced after 1938, so we're suggesting a manufacturing date somewhere between 1939 and early 1941 at the latest.

1959 J-200

In contrast to its older sibling, there is no mystery about this J-200. The serial number and FON stamp on the neck block both correspond with a production year of 1959. In fact, experienced vintage guitar enthusiasts could probably hazard a guess from the neck profile alone because it wouldn't feel out of place on a 1959 Les Paul. All the other 50s features are present, from gold-plated Grover Rotomatic tuners to single-ply headstock binding, a Brazilian rosewood fretboard and a lighter red, borderless pickguard. But most significant is the change to maple back and sides that occurred in 1947.

The youngest and least valuable actually has a claim to being the most historically significant

The maple is beautifully figured on the back, with the sides slightly muted but still displaying some curl, while the cherry sunburst has very little fade, retaining the same dark edges and vibrant red – front and back. The maple neck is very plain compared with both the body and the SJ-200's heavily flamed two-piece neck. A factory applied stinger on the back of the headstock gracefully tapers into a rosewood fillet that runs the length of the neck.

At first glance, the bridges look indistinguishable, but the SJ-200's is taller. Digital callipers confirm this, with the early bridge measuring around 8.25mm and the J-200's closer to 4.5mm. Perhaps the '59 bridge had been shaved down to lower the action, but with the top edges so beautifully rounded and no evidence of any work having been done, we feel that's unlikely.

1984 J-200

Of the three guitars featured here, the youngest and least valuable actually has a claim to being the most historically significant. In addition to being the last J-200 produced in Gibson's Kalamazoo factory, it's the very last flat-top acoustic ever made there. It's no surprise that the Custom Shop pulled out the stops for this one, and not all the features are typical of J-200s. There's a rosewood peghead overlay and truss rod cover, and an engraved rosewood pickguard with edge binding. All the rosewood parts on this guitar, including the fretboard, appear to be Brazilian.

The '59's back was impressive enough, but the quilting on this example is simply outrageous. The figuring extends to the sides and the three-piece maple neck. And to top it off, there's an engraved mother-of-pearl headstock plaque to commemorate this guitar's place in Gibson history.

Other decorative appointments include a multi-coloured back strip and multi-ply binding around the back. It feels slightly bigger than both the others and a quick check reveals that, at 5.25 inches, the body is slightly deeper.

Heavyweight Contest

The pre-WWII SJ-200 sounds utterly huge with very deep and punchy bass, strong mids and clear highs. The tone is laden with harmonics and yet there's an even balance all across the frequency range. The dynamic range is astonishing, with the guitar responding to a feather-light touch as well as strong-armed strumming. Try as we might, we couldn't push the top beyond its limits.

3. For 1959, Gibson replaced the tulip buttoned Kluson tuners with gold-plated Grover Rotomatics and also introduced larger fretwire

4. This commemorative 1984 J-200 from the Gibson Custom Shop was fitted with a bound and engraved rosewood pickguard, rather than celluloid

Measuring 44.75mm at the nut with a string spacing of 37.75mm, the SJ-200 is built for dedicated acoustic players, but the surprisingly slim and soft-shouldered neck profile is extremely comfortable. The only criticism that some might level is that its sonic signature doesn't meet expectations of vintage J-200 tone quite like the '59.

Maple-backed acoustics are often erroneously assumed to be bright, but here it's like someone has activated an imaginary bass roll-off instead. Playing the '59 is an altogether calmer and more intimate experience. It sounds beautifully freed up, with the dry midrange and warm trebles that provide so much of the vintage Gibson allure. This guitar effortlessly generates the J-200 songs you've heard on countless records. With a 43mm nut width and 36mm string spacing, the fuller 50s neck feels sublime, but the replaced saddle doesn't do the top E any favours and we suspect the guitar would benefit from a new one.

The '84 has the best setup, is the easiest to play, and more than holds its own with the other two. Sonically, it slots neatly between its older siblings, with deeper bass, extra sustain and more harmonic overtones than the '59 but less of the vintage woodiness. The neck width and string spread are very close to the '59's, but the neck profile is remarkably similar to the SJ-200's. Judging by its condition, the '84 has barely been played over the past 40 years and we suspect that this already fine-sounding J-200 still has unreleased potential.

Let's put these guitars on a piano scale, with a 1920s catalogue parlour at the out-of-tune honky-tonk end of the spectrum: the '59 is like a fine-quality upright, the '84 resembles a domestic baby grand, and SJ-200 is a concert hall Bechstein. Playing all three has been a privilege. G

5. Set into the rosewood peghead veneer, an engraved pearl plaque reads "the last Gibson flat-top guitar made at the Kalamazoo plant"

6. The back and sides of the 1984 J-200 feature some of the most highly figured maple we have ever seen on a Gibson acoustic

With thanks to Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath, where the 1984 J-200 is for sale, for the kind loan of these guitars www.vintageandrareguitars.com

STRING THEORY

A Thing About Strings

Strings have a major influence on your acoustic tone, as Jack Dunwoody of revered British maker Rotosound discusses with **Jamie Dickson**

Jack Dunwoody, Rotosound product expert, joins us to help optimise your unplugged sound

Acoustic guitars don't have the tone-tweakability of electric guitars, so your choice of strings is especially important. The good news is that advances in string-making technology have granted guitarists more choice than ever before. But that very diversity also makes choosing the right set of strings more daunting. We join Jack Dunwoody, a product expert with Rotosound, to get his advice on what you need to know about strings to make an informed, tone-enriching choice the next time you string up your acoustic guitar.

"A new set of uncoated strings has a certain brightness that you just can't get with coated strings... [but] coated are consistent for longer"

Let's start with the basics. The most common types of string for acoustic guitar are phosphor bronze and 80/20 bronze, terms that refer to the alloy used for the wrap-wire on the wound strings. What's the difference between them?

"Mostly the tone. So phosphor bronze is a very even-sounding string. The middles come through very nicely, and they have a great sustain to them. And then the 80/20 has more of a scooped middle sound – we'd describe it as more of a 'hi-fi' sound – where you've got some very strong bass and a lovely crisp, crystalline top-end. You can visually tell the difference by looking at the wire, as well, on the string: the phosphor bronze is a little bit more of an orangey colour, whereas 80/20 has a bit more of a yellow colour. Actually, although '80/20 bronze' is the name that we give it in our industry, it's actually brass – 80 per cent copper, 20 per cent zinc – hence the yellowish colour."

The bronze alloy wrap-wire described in the previous question is typically wound around a steel core. Describe the role of the core and some variations in its design that you commonly see.

"Manufacturers will offer hex-core or round-core strings. Hex core is by far the most popular type of core in use nowadays because it gives you a really stable string, in terms of tuning. That's because the hexagonal [cross-section] of the core allows the wrap-wire to grab hold of that and not slip. So that's what we use at Rotosound. Purely for tuning stability, we found it works really well. The majority of your [wound] acoustic guitar strings will then just receive one layer of wrap-wire that gets wrapped around the core. And that would usually be one of the two materials we've spoken about: the phosphor bronze or 80/20 bronze. But the heaviest strings receive an additional wrap around them to build them up to where they're thick enough but also flexible enough to work well on a guitar and sound right."

The plain strings within Rotosound's Nexus sets use a platinum-plated steel for a longer lasting effect than tin plating

Bronze alloy wraps are typically used on the wound strings, E, A, D and G. How do they differ from the plain strings above them?

"Yeah, when we're talking about cover alloys like phosphor bronze and 80/20 bronze, those are just used for the wrap-wire on the wound strings. We choose those alloys for that role because they're soft, which allows us to wrap them around the core easily, and because of their tonal properties. But you couldn't make the whole string out of them because they're so soft that if you actually put it on a guitar and tried to use it as one of the high strings, you'd be tuning it forever because it would just keep stretching and you'd never get up to pitch – it's not suitable for that.

"So our plain [non-wound] strings tend to be tin-plated, high-tensile steel. It's so hard and high-tensile it'll hold tuning without breaking. It's basically the same material as the core of the wound strings, but it's not hexagonal, it's got a plain, round cross-section. However, with our Nexus acoustic strings, rather than using a tin-plated steel for the plain strings, we use a platinum-plated steel instead for the plain strings because they are produced as a longer lasting string. So, for our Nexus set, we've chosen a plating that's a little longer-lasting than the tin-plated steel equivalent."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROTOSOUND

Nexus is a coated string set – what, in your view, are the pros and cons of coated sets versus traditional uncoated acoustic strings? Traditionally, their main benefit was supposed to be resistance to corrosion and hence a longer life.

"Our Nexus strings use the same phosphor bronze wire that we use on our standard [uncoated] Jumbo King range, except in this case that wrap-wire comes from the supplier coated with a very thin layer of polymer. That then gets wrapped around the core, using the same process as we use for our normal uncoated strings. That means that we can use the same machinery, the same processes for making the strings, and that makes production a lot easier.

"But the main benefit of coating just the wrap-wire is that it feels more like an uncoated string. So you have the natural ridges that you'd have with an uncoated string when you run your fingers up and down. The tone is a little bit closer as well because you're not kind of dunking the whole thing in [a polymer coating, as some makers do] – it's not all completely restricted by the polymer coating, it's just the winding. So your fingers are not getting in contact with the core of the string, therefore you're not corroding that part of the string. For us, we feel that having the winding coated provides that protection, but it's also a balance to give the normal feel of a string that's uncoated."

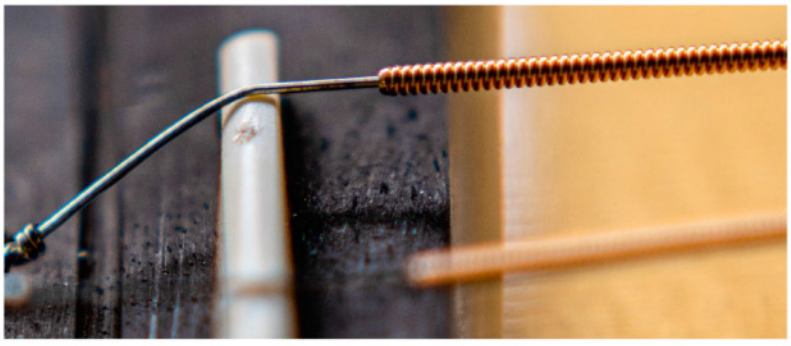
Given the benefits of coated strings, why do some players still opt for uncoated?

"I think the main reason would be the tone – there's a certain brightness that you get with a brand-new set of uncoated strings that you just can't get with the coated strings. However, I would say that over the lifetime of the string, once they've settled in, the coated strings are a lot more consistent for longer. My general view that I've got from working in the industry is that it's more the players who prefer to keep strings on for a long time on their instrument who will go for the coated strings. They might not be picking their acoustic up every day. But when they come back to it, they want it to sound consistent over months. And you will get that with the coated strings.

"Another thing worth mentioning as well is finger noise. Some people really object to the sound of finger noise when they're playing acoustic, and the coated strings definitely mitigate that quite a bit. Then again, we have a lot of artists who use our *un*coated acoustic strings for recording, and many of them would say that they have to have uncoated strings, which they put on their guitar before they start recording a song. Even when it comes to the next day of recording, they would put on another fresh set of uncoated strings because that bright sound is exactly what they're after." G

Above: The Rotosound factory floor, where the company manufactures several hundred thousand acoustic strings per year

Below: Rotosound makes a full range of acoustic strings from a 'contact core' design whereby the wrap-wire stops short of the ball-end (below top), to phosphor bronze, 20/20, coated and uncoated. The choice is up to a player's preference for acoustic guitar tone



BUYER'S GUIDE

Altered Tradition

Retro design and traditional charm meet modern reliability and innovation

Words Stuart Williams

FURCH VIOLET MASTER'S CHOICE GC-SM £1,109

There's a lot of innovation happening at Furch HQ, as evidenced by this Violet Master's Choice model. The Sitka spruce top has undergone Furch's voicing treatment, the end result being a top that's tuned to wring out every last drop of tonal richness and sustain. It's joined by Furch's CNR System that sees the truss rod housed in a carbon tube and adjusted bilaterally for greater stability.
https://furchguitars.com

GIBSON GENERATION SERIES G-45 £1,159

From the front, this G-45 appears to be another example of a spruce-topped acoustic. But a look at the (walnut) sides reveals a thinner body, and a big hole aka the Player Port – a 'lost' and subsequently revived 60s design, so the sound projects upwards towards the player, as well as outwards from the traditional soundhole. A forward-looking US-made Gibson for just over a grand.
www.gibson.com

JWJ 'THE HOG' £1,249

It might be JWJ's entry-level model, but The Hog is bringing home the retro bacon. The construction is Honduras mahogany throughout, with an AA-grade example saved for the top. Inside, the Sitka spruce bracing (hand-carved, just like the top) has been torrefied for added stability, and the whole lot is coated in a thin nitro finish. Available as an LR Baggs-equipped electro for an extra £300.
https://jwjguitars.co.uk

ATKIN THE FORTY THREE £3,469

The Forty Three from Atkin harks back to a time when not every acoustic was a pale spruce. It comes in either aged or mirror finishes (both nitrocellulose lacquer), in a number of colours. Underneath, you get the archetypal songwriter's guitar pairing of mahogany back and sides with a baked Sitka spruce top that should perform like a vintage guitar straight out of the box.
https://atkinguitars.com

MARTIN D-18 MODERN DELUXE £3,879

This model is all about introducing modern precision to vintage mojo. The latter comes from a Vintage Tone System top that's been pre-aged to respond like a matured guitar, and the neck is set using a dovetail joint and natural 'protein' glue to replicate Martins of yore. Meanwhile, its modern features include Liquidmetal bridge pins and a composite fingerboard for zero inconsistencies.
https://furchguitars.com

LOWDEN ORIGINAL SERIES THE 22 £4,110

Based on George Lowden's first designs in the late 70s, it's easy to see where the Original Series 'The 22' gets its name. It's a jumbo-sized body, with zero compromise on materials, and despite its larger body, The 22 promises piano-like sustain and clarity from a cedar top and mahogany back and sides. Lowden offers a choice of an LR Baggs Anthem or Highlander IP1/IP2 pickup systems.
https://lowdenguitars.com

ready when you are

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Rotosound's long-life Nexus strings keep their superb tone and fresh feel over time, ensuring your guitar is always ready whenever inspiration strikes. The only coated guitar string made in the UK.

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30 Open-Tuned Chords

Richard Barrett explores alternative and open tunings with 30 chord voicings that are guaranteed to enrich your acoustic vocabulary

The acoustic guitar remains one of the most popular instruments among singer-songwriters, as well as solo instrumentalists. Admittedly, this is probably in part due to it being so portable, but beyond such everyday practicalities, there is an enduring fascination in getting so much from an instrument that, in theory, could seem quite limited. We have just six strings to work with, but, if anything, this seems to encourage us to push the boundaries – and it's not uncommon for seasoned players to discover new chords and voicings that have been hiding in plain sight for decades!

If we move beyond the standard tuning, these possibilities multiply, as suddenly we're able to access voicings that are impossible – or even painful – in regular tuning. We can use the open-tuned strings as a 'drone' while shifting one note around, or see what happens when we try regular chord shapes in the non-standard tunings. Changing things up like this can also shift writers' block or give the solo acoustic guitar a more wide-ranging yet self-contained sound.

In this feature we're looking at some of the more popular tunings, but rather than simply showing a few major and minor voicings that are widely available elsewhere, we'll be exploring some of the more unusual, following in the footsteps of players such as Joni Mitchell, Nick Drake, Jimmy Page, Nick Harper and Gordon Giltrap. Welcome to the tuning rabbit hole!

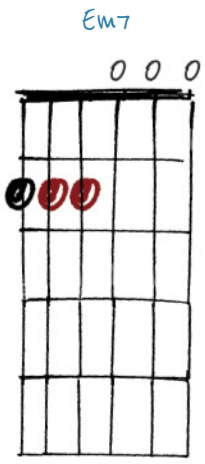
Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

Tuning #1: Double Drop D

To try this tuning, simply drop both high and low E strings by a tone, giving (low to high): DADGBD. Neil Young is fond of this tuning; check out *Cinnamon Girl* and *Cortez The Killer*.

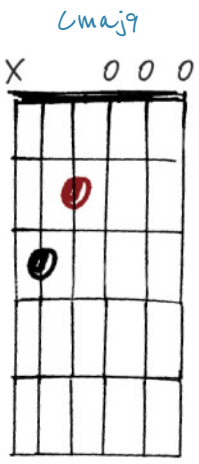
Example 1

This Em7 makes use of the open first string, giving us the 7th (D) as the top note. We're fretting the sixth string at the 2nd fret, giving us the root (E) we would have if we left this string in standard tuning. But we will be making use of this soon...



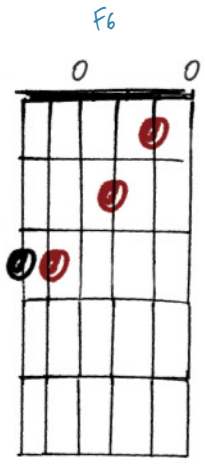
Example 2

While we're in open position, this is what happens when we use a Cmaj7 shape. The 9th (D) is provided by the open first string. Play a regular C chord and you'll get Cadd9.



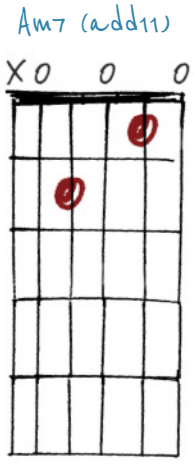
Example 3

The 6th (D) appears on the open fourth and first strings here, giving this chord an unusual feel, very Nick Harper in style. Like Examples 1 and 2, this chord features open strings, so strictly speaking it isn't movable. But why not try anyway?



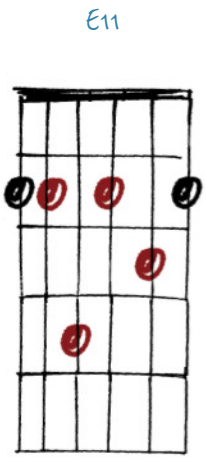
Example 4

As you can see, this tuning allows for quite a few 'standard' chord shapes (similar to open G), but the open D strings do allow us to stretch out a little. In case you haven't already guessed, the add11 (D) is our trusty open first string!



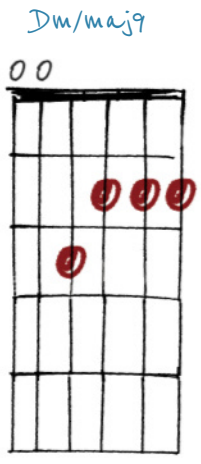
Example 5

Open tunings don't necessarily have to mean open chords – this example uses all six strings with a barre at the 2nd fret. It looks like a Bm7, but the detuned first and sixth strings completely change the harmony, giving us this hybrid of D and E chords that constitutes E11.



Example 6

Hopefully by now, we've dispelled any myths that open tunings are only for folk songs! This 'James Bond' chord features a ♭3rd (F), giving it the 'minor' part of the name, plus a major 7th (C#), giving us the 'major' in the form of a maj7th. Finally, we get the 9th (E) on the first string. All done with just two fingers!



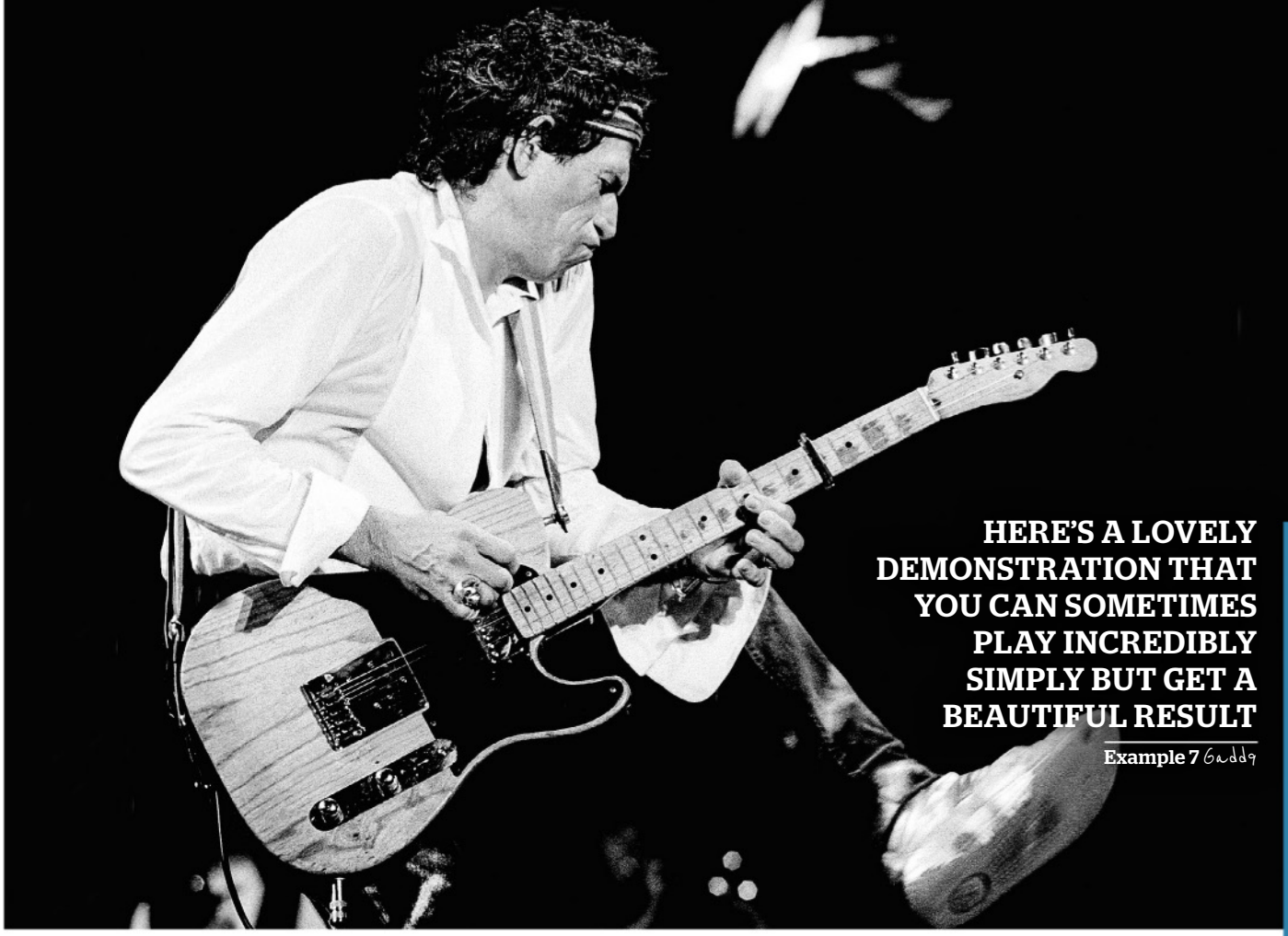


PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

HERE'S A LOVELY DEMONSTRATION THAT YOU CAN SOMETIMES PLAY INCREDIBLY SIMPLY BUT GET A BEAUTIFUL RESULT

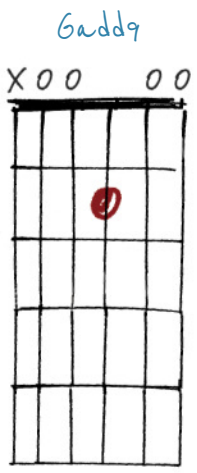
Example 7 Gadd9

Tuning #2: Open G

Perhaps the most widely used open tuning of all, by everyone from Robert Johnson to Keith Richards. Once again, drop the first and sixth strings down a tone from E to D, then do the same with the fifth string from A to G, giving us (from low to high): DGDGBD.

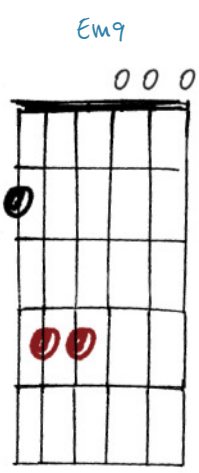
Example 7

Here's a lovely demonstration that you can sometimes play incredibly simply but get a beautiful result. Though many of the examples throughout this feature seek to demonstrate alternative chord shapes, don't forget moving one note around can be enough.



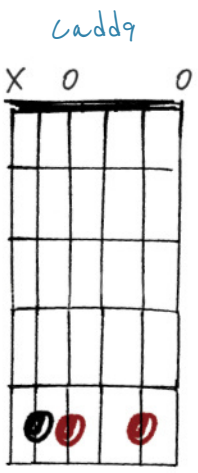
Example 8

Being able to play Em9 as a ringing open chord is a real bonus in open G. Though it can seem counterintuitive fretting the sixth string to get what would be the open root in standard tuning, don't forget the possibilities the open D can give elsewhere.



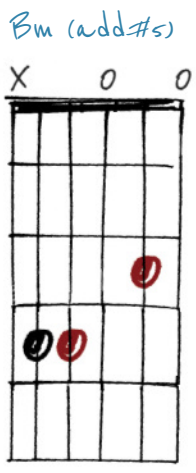
Example 9

While there are movable chords to be found in this tuning, it's hard to resist making use of the ringing open strings, so here's a Jimmy Page-style Cadd9. It's worth sliding this shape around to see what other chord voicings you can create.



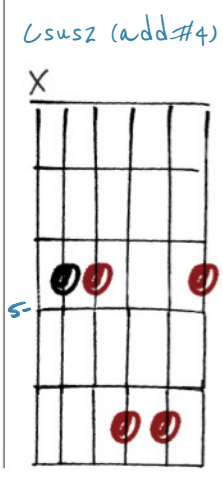
Example 10

You can see this chord comes from shifting and altering the same fretted strings against the open ones. Though the name sounds complex, it's really just a Bm with a ringing open third string. This gives us the #5 (G).



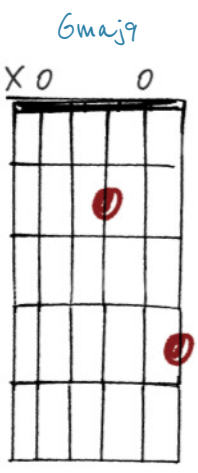
Example 11

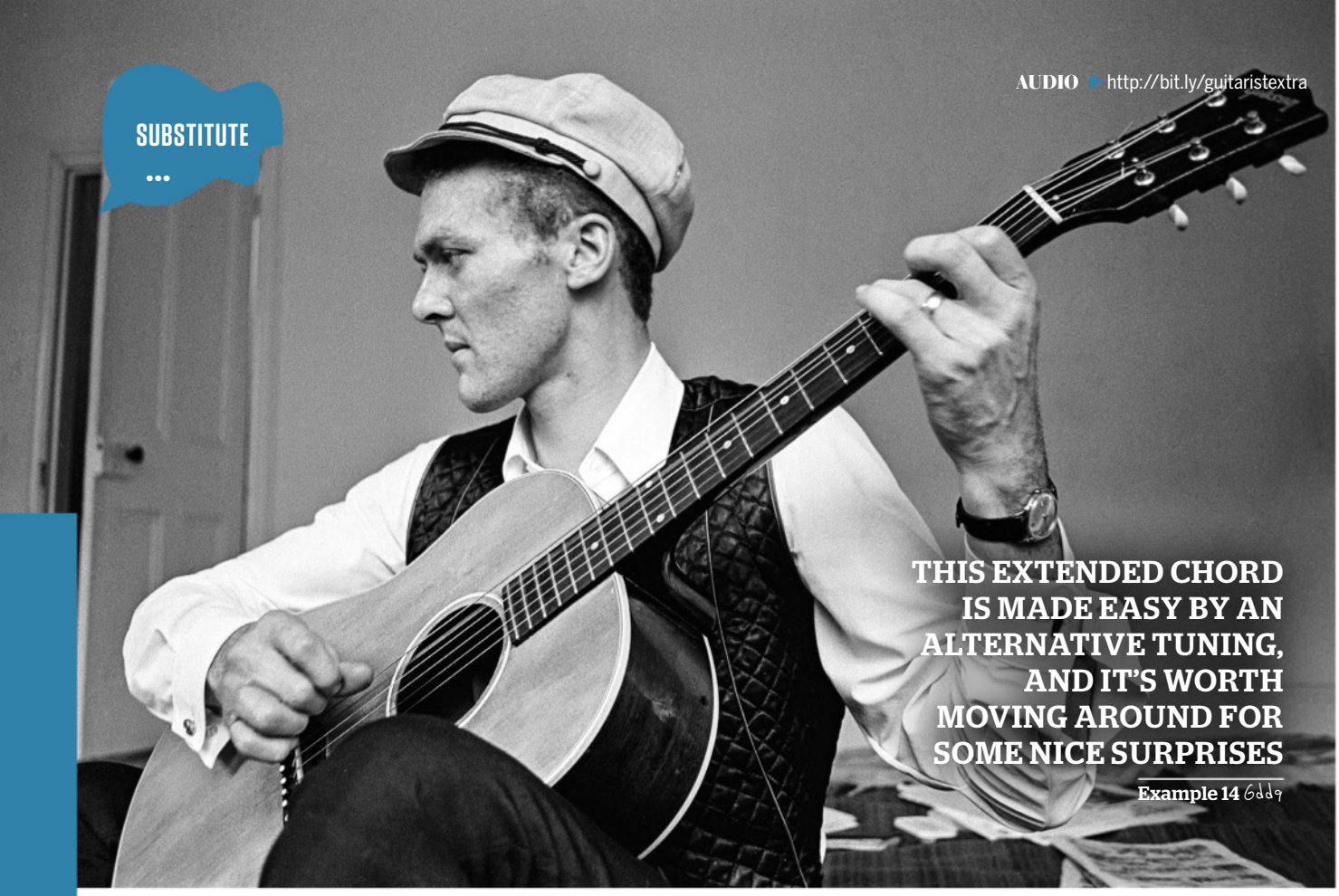
Here's a movable chord with a complicated-sounding name. If you lift off the second string but keep the rest of the shape (including the barre) intact, you'll get a Cadd9. If you lift off the third string, too, leaving just the barre, you'll see where Joe Satriani's *Flying In A Blue Dream* came from.



Example 12

Gmaj9 sounds lovely in this open position, but with minimal effort it could be made movable as a barre chord, similar to Example 11. It's not always important to understand the theory behind the chord names and shapes – that can come later.





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THIS EXTENDED CHORD IS MADE EASY BY AN ALTERNATIVE TUNING, AND IT'S WORTH MOVING AROUND FOR SOME NICE SURPRISES

Example 14 Gadd9

PHOTO BY BRIAN SHUEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

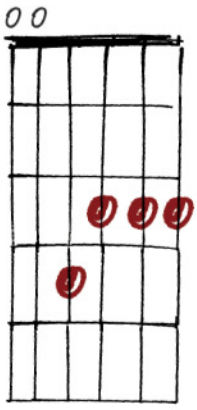
Tuning #3: DADGAD

Though very popular in folk/Celtic circles, with Davey Graham (above) introducing it to the mainstream in the 60s, this tuning was also used by Jimmy Page to compose *Kashmir* and provides plenty of other opportunities to get weird and wonderful. As with our first two tunings, drop the first and sixth strings down a tone to D, then the second string down a tone to A. Leave everything else in standard, giving us (from low to high): DADGAD.

Example 13

It may sound as though we're jumping in the deep end, but this is actually a two-finger chord, based around a D7 but adding a twist with the #5th (A#) and #9th (F). Yes, F is also the minor 3rd, but that would conflict with the D7's F# on the fourth string, so we're calling it an extension.

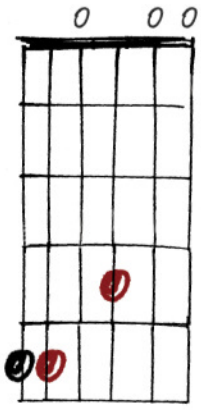
D7 (#5#9)



Example 14

Another extended chord made easy by an alternative tuning! This is another shape worth moving around for some nice surprises. It's also worth moving notes up or down a semitone/fret within a shape where possible, as this can sometimes give you other useful chords.

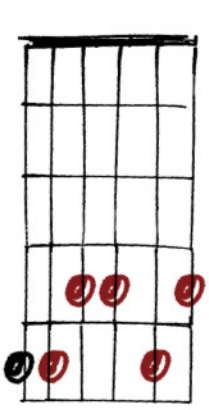
Gadd9



Example 15

Here's a movable maj7th voicing (featured here in G) that can be taken anywhere on the fretboard, space permitting. It's a little tricky at first but well worth the trouble. Most definitely a surprise, given this tuning's Moroccan/ Celtic heritage.

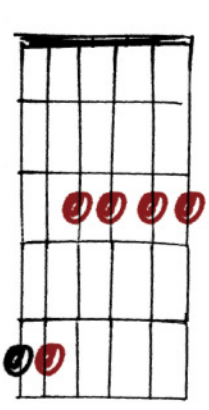
Gmaj7



Example 16

A first-finger barre at the 3rd fret while holding down two strings in the bass gives us this lovely Gm11 chord. The 7th (F) appears on the first string, with the 11th (C) on the second. This is another movable chord, with all six strings fretted.

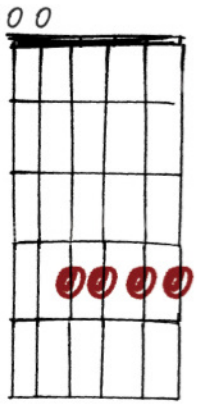
Gm11



Example 17

A nice choice to resolve to after the Gm11 in Example 16, this is a one-finger barre at the 4th fret of the first, second, third and fourth strings. There are several other voicings of Dmaj7/D7 to be found around here, so keep experimenting. In the meantime, check out the next example.

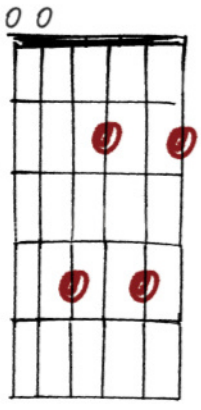
Dmaj7 (add6)

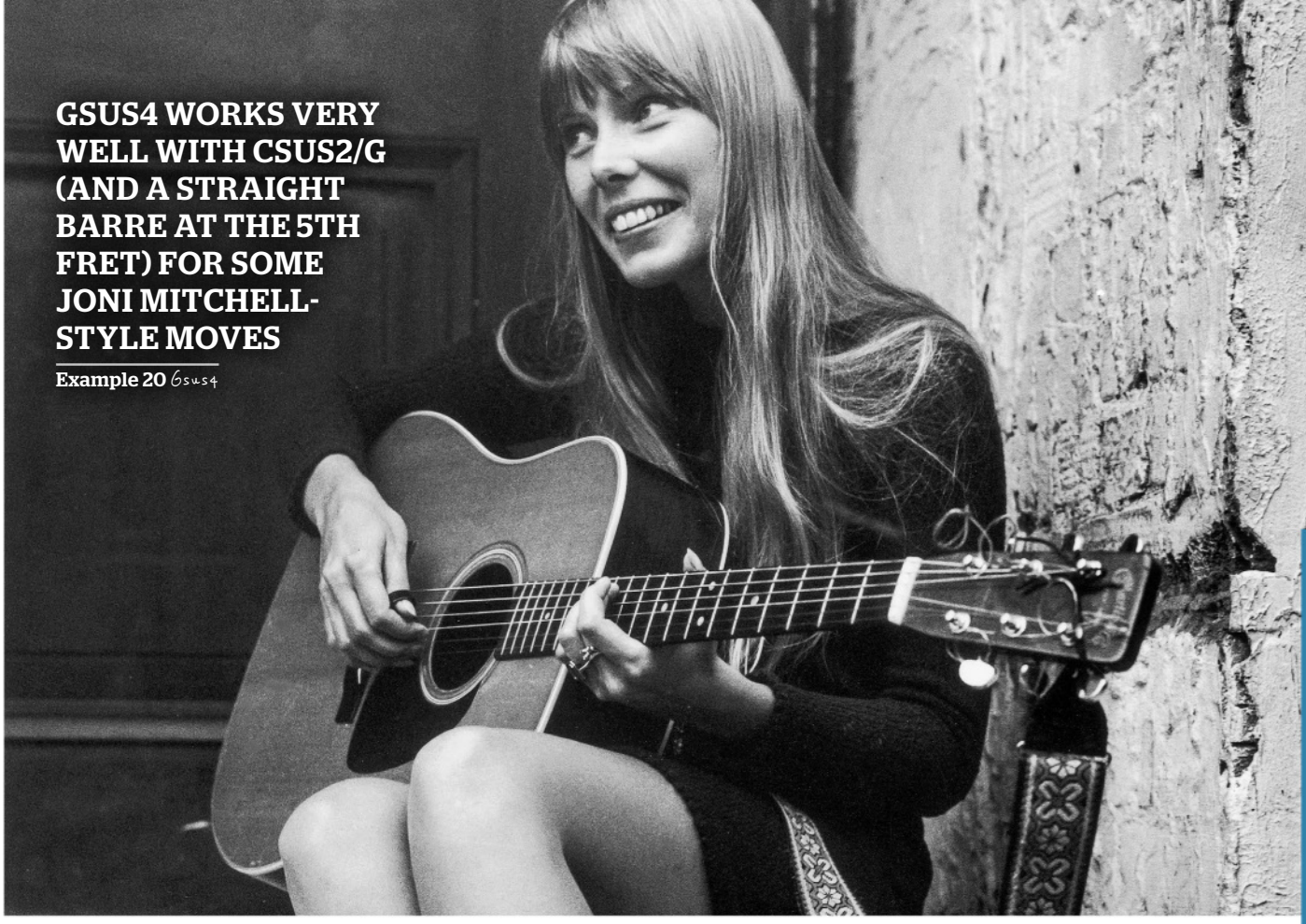


Example 18

Here is one of the other Dmaj7-inspired voicings found in the same area as Example 17. As we have a 9th (E) at the 2nd fret of the first string, along with the maj7th (C#) on the second, this is called a major 9th chord.

Dmaj9





GSUS4 WORKS VERY WELL WITH CSUS2/G (AND A STRAIGHT BARRE AT THE 5TH FRET) FOR SOME JONI MITCHELL-STYLE MOVES

Example 20 Gsus4

PHOTO BY CENTRAL PRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

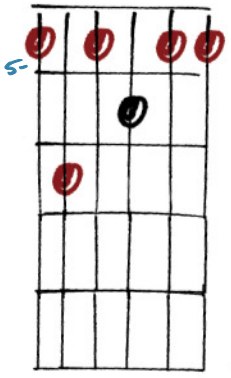
Tuning #4: Open D

Another very popular tuning, you can hear a bit of *Brown Sugar*-era Keith Richards and a little bit of Joni Mitchell. As before, we start by tuning the first and sixth strings down a tone to D, then the second string down a tone to A. Finally, we tune the third string down a semitone from G to F#, giving us (low to high): D A D F# A D.

Example 19

Play what would be an A7 barre chord in standard tuning and you get this interesting Csus2/G chord. The G is our bottom note on the sixth string, but we then move up to an E on the fifth string, which would give us a Csus2/E... Don't get stuck on the theory, just keep looking for weird chords!

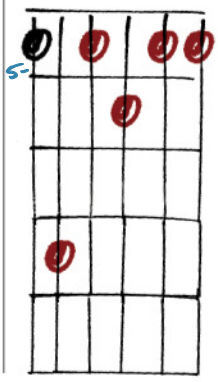
Csus2/G



Example 20

Though it's only one note different from Example 19, this is contrasting enough in theory to have a completely different name. It works very well with Example 19 (and a straight barre at the 5th fret) for some Joni Mitchell-style moves.

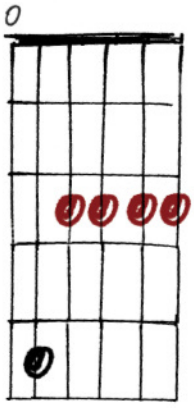
G7sus4



Example 21

Bringing back some open strings, this Dm7 makes use of the open sixth string (D) as the root. In a band context (or with a bass player), this could become a movable chord by omitting the sixth string/root.

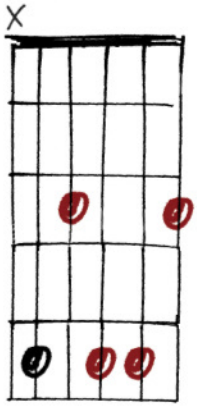
Dm7



Example 22

Though we could use the open sixth string as the root here, there's no need, as it appears on the fifth string. This also makes this chord movable, so it's worth investigating whether other chords might be found by tweaking this shape. The 6th (B) is found here on the third string.

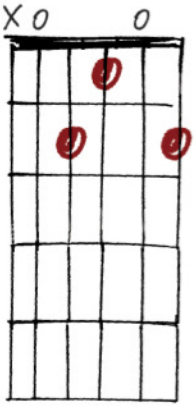
Dm6



Example 23

Judging by the name, this is a very common chord, but because we're in open D, there is a twist... The 7th (G) is adjacent to the root (A) on the open second string, so this gives a certain dissonance – or texture, at least. A useful chord, for sure.

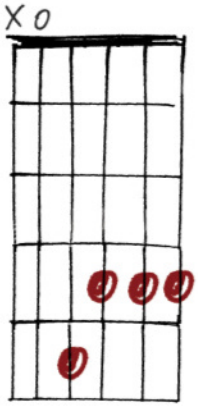
A7



Example 24

More the type of chord you'd expect to find in a jazz ballad than in open D tuning, but that's what makes things interesting. Another two-finger chord with a complicated name. Why not see if you can find a Dmaj7 somewhere to resolve this to?

A13 (b9)



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THIS MOVABLE CHORD USES ALL SIX STRINGS, AND THIS SHAPE IS GREAT FOR USING AS A BASIS FOR EXPERIMENTATION

Example 29 Ebadd9

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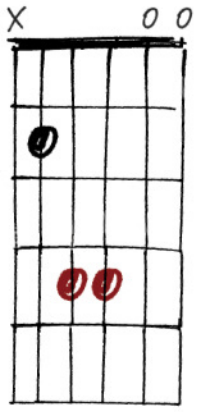
Tuning #5: Open C

Unlike the other tunings here, open C is not based around dropping E strings down to D. Though it shares some characteristics with the other tunings, we're getting much more into Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* territory, with a bit of Jimmy Page similar to *Friends* or *Bron-Yr-Aur*. Drop the sixth string two tones down to C (extra light strings may get a bit loose), then the fifth and fourth down a tone to G and C respectively. Leave the third and first strings standard but raise the second string a semitone to C. This gives us (low to high): CGCGCE.

Example 25

As with the other tunings, we've avoided the obvious barre shapes in favour of some more exotic voicings. This lovely Amadd9 makes use of the open first and second strings, but we're saving that open C at the bottom for later.

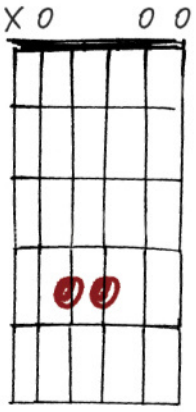
Amadd9



Example 26

As the name implies, the only thing different about this compared with Example 25 is the G in the bass. However, it fits beautifully with Example 25 and demonstrates how just a small change in fingering can give a radically different chord/mood.

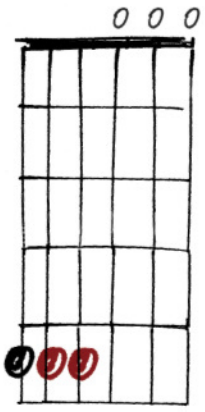
Amadd9/G



Example 27

This would be a relatively easy-to-recognise Fsus2 but for the maj7th (E) that appears on the open first string. This starts to hint at shades of Nick Drake, though most of his tunings were altered, rather than open. But you could try tuning the third string down a tone to F and using a capo at the 2nd fret for *Pink Moon*.

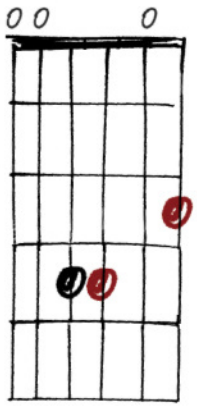
Fsus2 (addmaj7)



Example 28

While the name suggests a well-known chord, this really is Cmaj7 with a twist. Firstly, the low C and G on the sixth and fifth strings give much more depth than any standard tuned version. Secondly, the maj7th (B) ringing adjacent to the open C (root) on the second string gives an interesting dissonance.

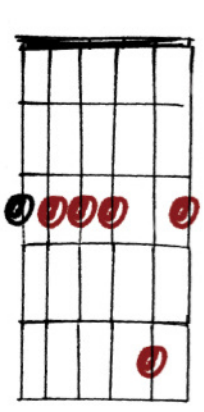
Cmaj7



Example 29

A movable chord using all six strings, this shape is great for using as a basis for experimentation. Try lifting off or adding various notes to the basic barre and you will find a few other useful chords you can use anywhere.

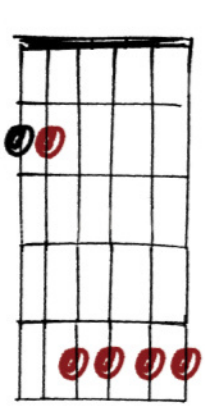
Ebadd9



Example 30

Another six-string chord that can move anywhere. This one needs a bit more fretting hand strength, but the detuned strings can help a little, as they don't need quite so much pressure. Try moving just the barre up to the 3rd fret for another interesting chord.

Dm7



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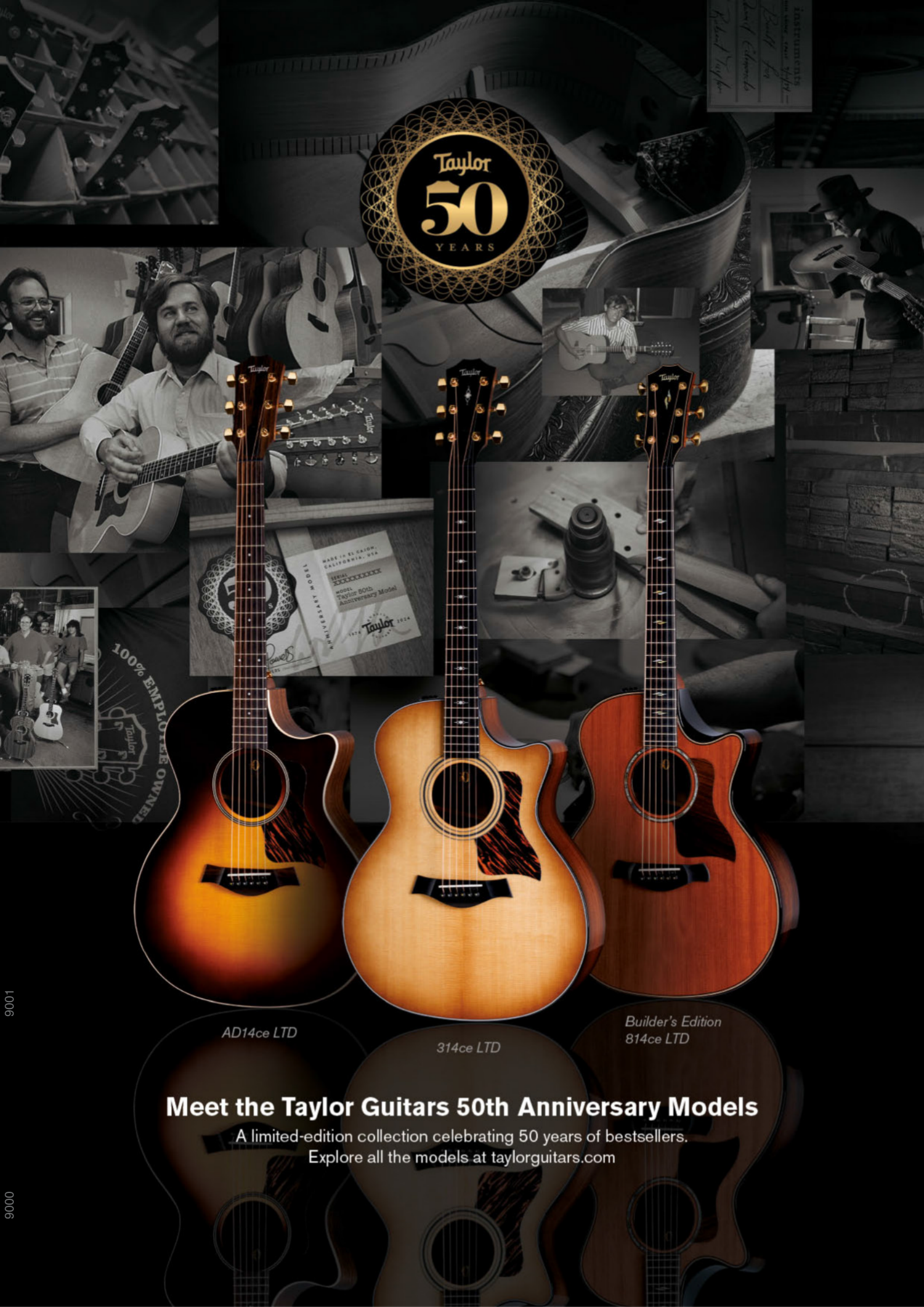
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